

C O N T E N T S

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxii
<i>Preface</i>	xxiii
<i>Introduction</i>	xxxii
 <i>Part One: The Cretan Prelude</i>	
I Minoan Visions	
The Spirit of Minoan Art	5
The Minoan Gesture	10
Visionary Crete	14
Transcendence in Nature	20
Artificially Induced Transcendence	22
II Light and Honey	
Flaming New Year	29
The Preparation of Mead	35
The Awakening of the Bees	38
The Birth of Orion	41
Mythology of the Leather Sack	44
III The Cretan Core of the Dionysos Myth	
Bull, Snake, Ivy, and Wine	52
Dionysian Names	68
Iakar and Iakchos	73
Zagreus	80
Ariadne	89
	vii

Part Two: The Greek Cult and Myth

IV The Myths of Arrival

From the History of Science	129
The Forms of Arrival	139
Arrivals in Attica	141
The Arrival in Athens	160
Myth of Arrival and Ancient Rite outside of Attica: Thebes and Delphi	175

V Dionysos Trieterikos, God of the Two-Year Period

Age and Continuity of the Trieteric Cult	189
The Dialectic of the Two-Year Period	198
Dionysos in Delphi	204
The Mystical Sacrificial Rite	238
The Enthronement	262

VI The Dionysos of the Athenians and of His Worshipers
in the Greek Mysteries

The Thigh Birth and the Idol with the Mask	273
The Dionysian Festivals of the Athenians	290
The Beginnings of Tragedy in Attica	315
The Birth and Transformation of Comedy in Athens	330
The Greek Dionysian Religion of Late Antiquity	349

<i>Abbreviations</i>	391
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<i>List of Works Cited</i>	393
----------------------------	-----

<i>Index</i>	421
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<i>A Note on C. Kerényi</i>	445
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<i>A Bibliography of C. Kerényi</i>	447
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DIONYSOS

Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life

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Part One The Cretan Prelude

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I. MINOAN VISIONS

The Spirit of Minoan Art

ANYONE who enters the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion in Crete encounters an abundance of the purest elements of a great prelude: the prelude to the history of religion in Europe. For a time these treasures remained mute, for they were seen only as astonishing works of art. They bore witness to the rich life of a people who were endowed with high artistic gifts but whose writing no one could read. It was long believed that even if we were able to decipher the written characters, the language would still be incomprehensible. The one thing which students felt certain of was that the men who had created and maintained this art were not Greeks and that they were separated from the Greeks by a downfall similar to if not even more catastrophic than that which separated pagan Rome from the Christianized Latin and Germanic peoples.

It was assumed that the Cretans, like the Romans, had left a cultural heritage and that those who came after did not fail to make use of it. But apart from the visible and tangible works that came to light after 1900 when Sir Arthur Evans began his excavations at Knossos, everything that was said of these pre-Greeks—they were termed “Minoans” after the mythical king of Crete—was mere hypothesis, abstract and indemonstrable. The works, however, provided a highly characteristic over-all picture which would have been intelligible even without words and has more important things to tell us about the Minoans than the meager account of the texts that have since been deciphered.

An outstanding authority, Nikolaos Platon, a Cretan who spent the greater part of his life in daily contact with these objects, has characterized them and the people who created them as follows. The Minoans “created a civilization whose characteristics were the love of life and nature, and an art strongly imbued with charm and elegance. Their objects of art were miniatures, worked with care and love; they chose carefully the material which they used and succeeded in creating masterpieces with it. They had a special inclination towards the picturesque and to painting, and even their miniature plastic work is elaborated in styles derived from painting. Motion is its ruling characteristic; the figures move with lovely grace, the decorative designs whirl and turn, and even the architectural composition is allied to the incessant movement becoming multiform and complex. The art is ruled by conventions, and yet it looks equally naturalistic. The secret life of nature is outspread in man’s creation, which imbues it with a special charm and grace. A hymn to Nature as a Goddess seems to be heard from everywhere, a hymn of joy and life.”¹

The wisdom of this account resides in the fact that it concentrates on the most characteristic factor and is not subject to the modifications in matters of detail that are always possible in archaeology.² Platon starts from a concrete, but at the same time spiritual, element that lends Minoan art a specific atmosphere which is to be found nowhere else and which differs from the atmosphere characteristic of Greek art after the Geometric style became prevalent. The word “life” occurs

¹ N. Platon, *A Guide to the Archaeological Museum of Heraclion*, pp. 27 f.

² “We are assisting today in the radical transformation of all theories, even of the principles themselves, of the exact sciences: how could archaeology, which is the youngest—and, let us say frankly, the least objective—among the sciences remain immovable and untouchable?” D. Levi, “The Italian Excavations in Crete and the Earliest European Civilisation,” p. 10.

three times in the short passage I have quoted. The word used in the original Greek text would have to be *zoë*, which lends itself to juxtaposition with *physis*, “nature,” in the sense of plant life. “Love of life and nature” suggests not only the common element in these works of art, but also their manifest content—a content which can find direct expression only in art and which is evident in all these objects, whatever their immediate purpose. In calling this manifest content, perceptible to every viewer, the “spirit of Minoan art,” I am not speaking of something abstract and have no need to prove that it is present. “Spirit” is openness and expansion of vision, a primordial experience of man. Openness and expansion arise naturally from a gift peculiar to man. They can take a definite direction; this we call a spiritual or cultural trend. On the strength of an evident direction, we can determine a characteristic spirit, in this case a spirit oriented toward life and nature, stressing them, bringing them out, and setting them before the eye.

In the passage cited above, Platon connected the very marked spirit of Minoan art with a particular deity, the only deity who, it was safe to assume, was a very special object of worship to the Minoans: the Great Goddess. A reliable portrait of her on the peak of a mountain appears on a seal from Knossos [1].³ In the background we discern a mountain sanctuary; and facing the goddess is a male figure looking up at her and greeting her. The mountain is flanked by two lions. It has not been possible to discover a Minoan name for the goddess, unless the Greek name already occurred among the Minoans. Her rela-

3 Fragmentary prints of this seal were preserved in the great palace under the remains of the “small Columnar Shrine,” an edifice which, according to Evans’ reconstruction, had a column in the middle (*Palace of Minos*, II, 804–10). In view of its situation it may be regarded as the central shrine of the entire palace.

tionship to wild nature was, however, as evident as that of a corresponding goddess in Greek mythology: Rhea, the Great Mother of the gods. The Great Goddess did not possess a significant cult site of her own on the Greek continent. At Knossos the foundations of her temple were shown to travelers in the Greek period.⁴ These remains demonstrate that this divine figure lived on among the Greeks.

The correspondence between the worship of this goddess and the spirit of Minoan art provides Platon's characterization with its central idea, which Platon himself wished to express with a certain restraint. He did not wish to say openly—though under the impact of his over-all view he came very close to it—that the art of the Minoans bore witness to the omnipotence in Crete of a single deity, a Great Goddess, who is manifested with varying attributes in the monuments. For, though undeniable, this correspondence does not justify us in identifying the characteristic spirit of this art exclusively with a mother religion, with the cult of a single ruling goddess. From no ancient monuments is it possible to draw inferences that would exclude the presence of something that is not represented. “The struggle with death, a familiar theme in prehistoric cultures, is not here discernible,” says Platon.⁵ The struggle with death *was* represented on Mycenaean tombs, and it may be mere chance that tombstones with similar representations have not been found in the Minoan sphere. But ancient art was never unrestricted in its choice of subject matter. It is not possible to draw a dividing line between religious awe and artistic taste: the principle of selection may have been determined by both at once and not by religion alone.

4 Diodorus Siculus V 66 1; identified by Evans (*Palace of Minos*, II, 6–7) with the foundations of a Greek temple between the propylaia and the central courtyard of the palace of Knossos.

5 *A Guide*, p. 28.

Even if this art did not express everything, it was *all expression*: the expression of a characteristic relation to the world, which runs unchanging through the manifestations of Minoan art and religion. The Minoan artist saw the world primarily in its plant and animal aspects—and very differently from the Christian artist, or from the Greek artist of the Geometric period and on. The attention of the Christians and Greeks was focused on anthropomorphic, spiritual gods. Small wonder that the Cretan eye saw other gods; these gods were, in a manner of speaking, the spirits, or the divine spirit, of the world of plants and animals. The sea roundabout adorned the wonderful Minoan vases not with Nereids but with polyps and nautili, and the murals with dolphins and flying fishes. It is possible that the Minoans looked upon two giant polyps—a male and a female—as the epiphanies of the divine rulers of the watery depths. Their marriage may have been the precursor of the marriage between Poseidon and Amphitrite.⁶ Votive offerings at the shrine of a goddess found near the present-day village of Piskokephalo in eastern Crete⁷ show that a scarablike dusk beetle, *Rhinoceros oryctes*, announced and accompanied a divine *parousia*, the presence of a goddess.

The Minoan artists bring us to a world of plants and animals, in which gods, coming from the sky, appear on mountain tops, beneath flowers. What was their view of man?

6 J. Wiesner, "Die Hochzeit des Polypus," pp. 35–51.

7 S. Alexiou, *Guide to the Archaeological Museum of Heraclion*, p. 80 (case 123).

The Minoan Gesture

ONCE AGAIN let us consult a modern, objective observer, a woman who studied the art monuments of Greece and those of the Near East with like dedication and was open to their special language—the language of art. “Cretan civilization is unhistorical not only in the sense that the modern historian happens to be unable to write an articulate account of its past, a record in which events and personalities have name and character, but because it lacked the desire for monumental statement, pictorial or otherwise. We find no interest in single human achievement, no need to emphasize, to rescue its significance.”⁸ Still more important is the following observation: “Cretan art ignored the terrifying distance between the human and the transcendent which may tempt man to seek a refuge in abstraction and to create a form for the significant remote from space and time; it equally ignored the glory and futility of single human acts, time-bound, space-bound. In Crete artists did not give substance to the world of the dead through an abstract of the world of the living, nor did they immortalize proud deeds or state a humble claim for divine attention in the temples of the gods. Here and here alone [in contrast to Egypt and the Near East] the human bid for timelessness was disregarded in the most complete acceptance of the grace of life the world has ever known. For life means movement and the beauty of movement was woven in the intricate web of living forms which we call ‘scenes of nature’; was revealed in human-bodies acting their serious games, inspired by a

8 H. A. Groenewegen-Frankfort, *Arrest and Movement*, p. 186.

transcendent presence, acting in freedom and restraint, unpurposeful as cyclic time itself.”⁹

Minoan art fully justifies this negative characterization—negative from the standpoint of man as the center, as the vehicle of his own historical and non-historical glory, but not from the standpoint of the deity, whose presence it demands and requires. Man is always on the edge of this epiphany of the spirit—the spirit or spirits of life and nature—if not face to face with it. In this view an intimation of the godhead could be manifested not only in a swarm of insects, in birds, or in the beasts of the sea, but also in a human gesture, and it could in turn determine man’s gestures.

For in Minoan art man is never without gesture, although figures standing or sitting gestureless are known to us in the art of the ancient Orient and Greece. There are cult gestures everywhere, but it is something else again when gesture becomes an essential element, a characteristic, of the general view communicated by art. Here I am speaking not of cult gestures side by side with other equally characteristic gestures of simple human existence, but of *the* gesture which time and time again, in different forms of movement, represents the identical situation of man: his non-central position which demands an “opposite” and can be understood only as an “opposite.”

This non-central position of man was confirmed by the deciphering of the Cretan writing. Even among the Mycenaeans, writing did not serve for self-perpetuation, for they too, for all their monumental edifices, scorned to put inscriptions on their tombs.¹⁰ If, as the Mycenaeans most probably did,¹¹ the Minoans possessed an epic poetry that

9 Ibid., p. 216.

10 See Kerényi, *The Heroes of the Greeks*, pp. 8 f.

11 See Kerényi, “Im Nestor-palast von Pylos,” *Werke*, II, 265.

complemented the statement of their art, it would not invalidate the testimony of the Minoan gesture that reveals man in a wholly religious situation: not oriented solely toward himself and his fellow men, but determined by something other, something outside himself, caught up in an atmosphere of festival as in an enchanted world.

The most dangerous of all Minoan gestures is to be seen in the bull game as represented in paintings and sculptured figures. Here the body is shown in free acrobatic movement. The player seizes the horns, lets himself be thrown upward by the bull, turns one or more somersaults in the air, and lands behind the animal which is running away [2].¹² The gesture grows out of the game, but game and body are a single indivisible gesture, free and at the same time controlled, which can well be said to have been “inspired by a transcendent presence.” The bull game was a repetition of the original capture of the wild bull before the days of domestication [3A/3B].¹³ From it developed the acrobatic art of the Minoan *toreros*. Such repetition and art require a religious inspiration, without which a festive game cannot come into being. For the Minoan bull game was clearly a festive game. In honor of whom? The Great Goddess of nature and life? Nikolaos Platon drew this inference from his interpretation of Minoan art.¹⁴ In his view, the goddess was the divine onlooker, the “opposite,” though this does not exclude the possibility of a divine presence in the game itself, especially

12 In this fresco from the small courtyard of the east wing of the palace of Knossos, three movements in the game are represented by three players, two girls and a young man, who execute the movements successively. An ivory figure reproduced in Marinatos and Hirmer, *Crete and Mycenae*, pl. 97, also shows the movement.

13 The scene appears on the ivory box published by S. Alexiou in ‘Υστερομινωικοί τάφοι λιμένος Κνώσου, figs. 30–33.

14 N. Platon, “Sir Arthur Evans and the Creto-Mycenaean Bullfights,” p. 93.

in the bull, an exemplary manifestation of the deity in Crete. Not only the human onlookers but also the Minoan *toreros*, who risked their lives with an art never equaled by their Spanish successors, are mere marginal figures in the drama they are performing.

It is somewhat different with the dance, the most universal gesture, in which man is all gesture. On a Minoan cup from the oldest palace of Phaistos, two girls are seen dancing around a goddess who approaches a flower springing up from the ground [4];¹⁵ in another, three women are dancing, the one in the middle being perhaps a goddess [5]. Other figures—all women—are visible on the rim or on the disk that forms the base of the vessel. They are probably not divine beings, but since those on the rim are bowing low, it cannot be doubted that this vessel too was used in the cult; it presupposes a “transcendent presence” in the dance itself. Inspired gesture raises man to the sphere of the gods and the dance does still more. In the dance, gods can be made present; the greatest deity can be drawn into the midst of the dancers. The two women of the first vase, standing on either side of the snake goddess, raising their hands in circular movements, and admiring the flower, are no less goddesses than the central figure. The dance figure unites gods and men on the same level.

In such dances, the distance between “opposites” is annulled. But elsewhere it is present: plainly so on the Knossos seal showing the Great Goddess on a mountain top, bare-bosomed and holding out her staff like a shepherd’s crook over the heads of the lions which flank her [1]. The man who holds his hand before his forehead—to judge by his size he is a superhuman being—is greeting her. Here the distance is manifest: on one side is the epiphany, and on the other, the beholder.

¹⁵ See the explanation in Kerényi, *Eleusis*, pp. xix f.; and “Die Blume der Persephone,” pp. 29 f.

This is the situation of a vision such as assuredly occurred in the world surrounding Minoan art. Such visions constituted a dimension above the visible dimensions of nature. The “Minoan gesture”—an element as characteristic of Minoan culture as the spirit of Minoan art—points to such a dimension.

Visionary Crete

IN ACCOUNTS of ancient religions too little attention has been paid to the visionary faculty.¹⁶ Visionary power does not seem to have been equally distributed among men; it was more abundant in ancient times and has steadily become rarer. Historians of religion have as a rule tended to ignore it unless their attention was called to it by explicit testimony. We find such testimony in the statements of the mystics of all times. But since mystics are exceptions in all religions and since historians of religion have no visions, our thinking in this matter ordinarily revolves around these two extremes: the positive experience of the mystics and the negative experience of the historians of religion

16 F. Matz, in “Götterscheinungen und Kultbild im minoischen Kreta,” has devoted a thorough archaeological investigation to this phenomenon of the Minoan religion. His findings, which are in every way positive, are rendered unclear by his unfortunate choice of the term *Epiphanienglaube* (“epiphanic faith”). Visionary capacity produces not “epiphanic faith,” but epiphanies, nor does it necessarily involve ecstasy. Matz exaggerates the importance in the Minoan religion of ecstasy, for which the monuments do not provide adequate support. According to him, “essential elements of the Dionysos religion are present in prehistoric Crete,” but from the name “Dionysos” he draws inferences only for the Mycenaean Greeks and not for the Minoan culture. He did not succeed in clarifying the relationships. We arrived at our largely similar conclusions independently of one another.

and all present-day non-mystics. We find little explicit testimony concerning what lies between the two extremes, although without such intermediate phenomena—the light, hovering visions of persons of moderate visionary endowment—a religion possessed of a living mythology would be unthinkable.

An indication that men in general are capable of such visions is supplied, for example, by the Indian coming-of-age ritual, which required all youths to fast and remain in the woods until they saw visions. We may seem to have drawn on a source remote from our subject, but all cultures have the same human *nature* as their basis though all cultures do not take the same attitude toward the capacity for visions. In the accounts of the religions of the forest Indians of North America, we find detailed indications of the type of visions that were demanded. They were waking dreams, which were expected to be sharper, more intense, and more striking than the dreams of sleep. An authority on the American Indians writes: “Visions are held to be ‘real’; they represent actual contact with the superhuman, whereas dreams do not necessarily do so.” And he quotes a saying of the Indians: “In visions there is something sacred, less so in dreams.”¹⁷

Homer may perfectly well have been thinking of visions of this kind when in the *Odyssey* he described the epiphanies of Artemis on high mountains: “She looked like Artemis, when bow in hand she comes down from the mountains, over lofty Taygetos or Erymanthos, to hunt the boars and fleet-footed deer: round about her the nymphs make sport, those daughters of Zeus who frequent her countryside; and her mother is proud indeed, for she lifts head and brow above all the troop, and she is pre-eminent where all are beautiful. So shone the fresh

¹⁷ W. Müller, *Die Religionen der Waldlandindianer Nordamerikas*, p. 57, citing Wm. Whitman, *The Oto*, p. 85.

young maiden among her girls."¹⁸ The myth of the gods is divine epiphany in the medium of language. It is not localized in the same way as visions. It can be related wherever its language is spoken. A vision always has as its setting a definite place, the place where it occurred. Its explicit localization bears witness to the visionary character of the myth cited above. This localization is a heritage of vision in myth and in all the tales that embody it, that is, in mythology.

Vision and myth, epiphany and mythology, influenced and engendered one another and gave rise to cult images. But in man's relation to the gods, epiphany has a priority grounded in the immediacy of every true vision. Visions and language are equally fundamental, and both are presuppositions of the mythological tale. In Crete visions are especially important. Cretan mythology has not come down to us in its own language. What we know of it through the Greeks is very meager, although there were numerous small shrines in Minoan Crete. How numerous has become known only recently, and we are not yet able to establish sure correspondences between the few old Cretan names preserved by Greek mythology and the figures known to us from art. According to Greek mythology, the snake goddess and the two dancing girls around the flower on the Phaistos cup [4] can only be Persephone and two companions.¹⁹ The exact correspondence, however, is a surprising novelty, which perhaps for that exact reason was not immediately noticed. For whom are we to take the man looking across at the goddess on the mountain top on the Knossos gem? He is experiencing an epiphany.

This is not, however, the only indication that the large island was especially conducive to visions. The ridges and peaks of the high Cretan

18 *Odyssey* VI 102–9 (W. H. D. Rouse translation, p. 71).

19 See note 15, above, and [1].

mountains, situated between the Aegean and Libyan seas, were an ideal scene for epiphanies: a world of light and a Minoan cult scene. The subterranean world, the world of caves, was also a place of the Minoan cult, which seems to have been practiced more on the heights and in the depths than in the great palaces. These palaces appear in certain respects to be the forerunners of the Greek temples, especially of those that exceeded the modest proportions of small sanctuaries. The palaces were characteristic of the style of Minoan culture and probably were sacred in their totality, though only certain rooms were employed in the cult and these were not always distinguished by a central or otherwise prominent position. With their complex structure and several stories, the palaces—this is evident at least at Knossos—seem to reproduce the Cretan cosmos, the true scene of the Minoan cult. On the upper floors we find several rooms each with a single round column in the center, a column broadening toward the top, as—to cite a simple example—in the so-called temple tomb near the palace of Knossos. The religious implications of this column cannot be doubted, and indeed it presents an obvious analogy to a mythical view of the heavens.²⁰ Such cult rooms both in the palace and in the tomb correspond to other cult rooms with posts in the middle; the column above is, as it were, a continuation of the post. The dividing line can be drawn between the upper and lower rooms, between column and pillar, corresponding to the imaginary line that divides the cosmos of the Cretans into a higher and lower cult world.

We must also look into the inside of Cretan nature, into some of the many limestone caves that make up the lower world. They seem to

20 Kerényi and Sichtermann, "Zeitlose Schieferbauten der Insel Andros," pp. 33 f.; Kerényi, "Die andriotische Säule," *Werke*, III. According to Evans (note 3, above), the small central shrine of the palace of Knossos shows the same type.

be innumerable. More than three hundred have already been explored²¹ in addition to those cult grottoes that have become famous. It is certain that the accidental human forms of the stalactites and stalagmites not only aroused the imagination of the ancients as they do of modern archaeologists, but also inspired visions that transformed the stalactite formations into divine figures. It cannot be established with certainty what those who visited Eileithyia in her cave near Amnisos, the harbor of Knossos, thought they saw there; but whatever they saw, they repeated the vision that had made the stalagmites into objects of the goddess' cult.

By the name Eileithyia, which the *Odyssey* mentions in connection with this grotto, the Greeks designated a goddess who presided over births and who presumably governed everything connected with the life of women even more in Minoan than in Greek times. A cult site of this goddess was a place dedicated to the origin of life. Two round enclosures are built into the cave. In front of them a very low stalagmite shaped like a navel might be regarded as a kind of altar. In the first enclosure stands a stalagmite suggesting two goddesses joined at the back [6].²² The archaic art of Crete also bears witness to a dual Eileithyia.²³ In the second, inner, and more important enclosure there

21 See P. Faure, *Fonctions des cavernes crétoises*.

22 [6] is after Faure, *Fonctions*, pl. VII 5. / I speak from firsthand observation, supported by S. Marinatos' report of his excavation, "Τὸ σπέος τῆς Εἰλειθυίας," pp. 100 f. Other "interpretations" are those of N. Platon, "Περὶ τῆς ἐν Κρήτῃ λατρείας τῶν σταλακτίτων," pp. 164 ff.; and Faure, *Fonctions*, p. 84. They are utterly free—as though there had been no myth to guide and determine the artist's imagination.

23 See, for example, the ivory relief in the Cretan style of the seventh century, in New York, published by G. Richter, "An Ivory Relief in the Metropolitan Museum of Art," pp. 261 ff. F. Matz came closest to the right interpretation in "Arge und Opis," pp. 1 ff. One of the two women is "released" and therefore

rises a solitary stalagmite. Phalli do not appear in Minoan works of high artistry. Here is one provided by nature. A masculine cult object is unmistakably present in the midst of this feminine sanctuary. Such emphasis on a natural phenomenon suggests insight and recognition among the visitors, whose visionary power no doubt helped to make the cave into a cult site. Statuettes—now in the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion—of mating couples from the cave sanctuary of Inatos on the southern coast of Crete leave no doubt as to the extreme concreteness of the Cretan view of the origin of life.

The heights, which stimulated the visionary power in a different way and in a still higher degree, also had their numerous sanctuaries, which we must include in our view of Cretan nature if we wish to form a conception of the island in the Minoan period. Before the erection of buildings, these sites of vision and worship were probably unmarked or marked only with stones. The list of mountain sites where traces of sanctuaries have been found has grown impressively.²⁴ It will grow still longer when the almost inaccessible mountain country of western Crete has been explored. Shrines that were built in such places are visible in works of art. The Knossos seal [1] showing the epiphany of the Great Goddess on the mountain top has a simplified picture of a temple corresponding to the human figure looking upward on the same plane. Thus, we know of these mountain shrines not only from the vestiges that have been preserved but from naturalistic rep-

“releasing”; the other is “bound” and therefore “binding.” They represent the two aspects of the goddess of childbearing. This reliably identifies the two figures as Eileithyia. Matz and others give her wrong names.

24 According to the compendious report of P. Faure, “Cavernes et sites aux deux extrémités de la Crète,” pp. 493 ff.; and N. Platon, Τὸ Ἱερὸν Μαζῶ καὶ τὰ μινωικὰ Ἱερὰ Κορυφῆς,” pp. 119 ff.

representations in works of art. On a Minoan vase [7]²⁵ a man sets a basket with sacrificial offerings down on a round rock in front of a shrine. To what unbelievable heights these offerings had to be carried is clearly shown. The woods are on the slopes below. The holy site hovers amid the crags above the tree line. The most perfect representation [8]²⁶ of such a shrine shows how, in the absence of people, it is occupied by the *agrimi*, the wild mountain goats of Crete, and by birds of prey.

Transcendence in Nature

THE MINOAN gesture presupposes the possibility of epiphanies produced and made credible by a visionary capacity. The gesture brings transcendence into nature. Cretan nature itself promoted the visionary capacity, and assuredly not only on the heights and in the depths. It would be a mistake to suppose that country sanctuaries existed only on mountain peaks. The visionary capacity was also stimulated and satisfied by Minoan art, which provoked a preliminary state, followed by another in which transcendence was induced by more violent means.

How a gesture can open up the dimension of vision as an additional dimension of nature is shown by a drawing on a small amphora from the oldest palace of Phaistos [9].²⁷ Two figures with upraised hands appear among crocuses. They are characterized only by this gesture. We may justifiably call them male gesture figures; to us they are nothing else. This gesture is well known to us from ancient Oriental art as

25 Published by S. Alexiou, *Νέα παράστασις λατρείας ἐπὶ μινωϊκοῦ ἀναγλύφου ἀγγείου*, pp. 346 ff.

26 Published by N. Platon, "Kato Zakros," p. 174, fig. 187.

27 Published by D. Levi, "Attività della Scuola Archeologica Italiana di Atene nell'anno 1955," p. 254, fig. 33.

a gesture of worship.²⁸ Who is being worshiped? What god has appeared to these figures? Or are the gesture figures themselves gods? An epiphany is enacted in a field of crocuses which to us evokes no name. For the Minoans it was a very different matter: to them this epiphany was familiar. They recognized it, either in the gesture figures or in some larger figure, whose worshipers or perhaps companions were these little male beings.

A true gesture is always an excerpt; its representation is an instant view of a movement. Minoan art succeeded in combining hints of transcendence with the utmost naturalness in representing scenes whose character is unmistakable. The seal disk of a golden ring from Isopata near Knossos shows a scene full of musical movement [10]. The movement starts from above, from the dimension of divine epiphanies. An epiphany occurs among flowers. Two snakes strangely animate the background; they are situated so high up that conceivably they belong to the divine world. A single great eye, somewhat lower down than the snakes—the eye of an observer from another, more likely lower than upper, world—lends the whole image a special depth. Someone is looking on. Two of the four large female figures are epiphanies of goddesses. A small, fifth, female figure, hovering in the air behind the four larger ones, indicates that they come from an upper region. She raises one hand, while the goddess striding before her, as though descending in a spiral, raises both hands. This is the gesture of epiphany. It is answered by the upraised hands of the remaining two large female figures. It would be inadequate to call this a gesture of worship. Their gesture is an answer not only to the epiphany, but to the gesture of epiphany.

Unlike the gestures of ritual, from which original vision is absent,

28 S. Alexiou, 'Η μινωική θεά μεθ' ὑψωμένων χειρῶν, pp. 250 ff.

the gestures in the visionary experience of an epiphany are authentic, not repeated gestures. In the representations they are not always quite the same, and their meaning is not always quite clear. On a gold ring from Knossos²⁹ a woman with her hand half-open greets a small male apparition which floats down from a country sanctuary [11].³⁰ On another ring two female figures greet each other with upraised hands [12]. One figure is nude, half-kneeling before a column indicating the sanctuary; the other, clothed, is arriving. Perhaps this latter figure with her dog or baboon is appearing to the other. If both women were goddesses, the epiphany gesture of the one and the responding gesture of the other were gestures of mutual greeting, and Cretan mythology has preserved the gestures. To us it is a mythology of images that speak for themselves. Thus, the faience statuettes from the palace of Knossos—female figures with bare breasts and outstretched or half-raised outspread hands bearing snakes, which in some cases are coiled around an arm [13, 14]—leave no room for doubt. It is uncertain only whether they represent a priestess or a goddess. By the gesture we recognize not the representative but the divinity. “Thus do I appear,” says the gesture.

Artificially Induced Transcendence

THE FEMALE idols of the Late Minoan period are rigid, but with their upraised hands they say the same thing as the statuettes from Knossos. They bear witness to the fact that vision and epiphany, an additional dimension amplifying the world of nature, were still a need of the

29 From the subterranean treasure rooms which may have contained the objects from the main chapel of the palace of Knossos.

30 [11] is after V. E. G. Kenna, *Cretan Seals*, pl. X 250.

Cretans at a time when not only their artistic ability but also their visionary capacity had dwindled. The human nature in which this need was rooted cannot have changed very appreciably. The artistic decadence revealed by clay statues of this type is unmistakable. They are busts of extremely primitive workmanship on bell-shaped bases. Five such statuettes were found in a country sanctuary near the village of Gazi west of Heraklion.³¹ On their heads they bear various attributes showing what goddess was intended.

The largest of these five female idols with epiphany gestures bears three poppy heads as head ornament and attribute. The stems are inserted behind her diadem [15].³² The clay tablets that have been deciphered testify to the fact that poppies were widely cultivated both on Crete and in Pylos in the Late Minoan period. The use of the poppy head as an ideogram in these account books leaves no room for doubt. The yield of poppies mentioned is so enormous that students long suspected that the figures referred to grain rather than poppies.³³ Here we must take note of a little-known feature of Minoan culture, at least in its late period.

*For the Greeks Demeter was still a poppy goddess,
Bearing sheaves and poppies in both hands.*³⁴

If in the Linear B script her name signified “poppy fields,” conclusions must be drawn regarding the food of the Cretans. Poppy seed with honey is highly nutritious and not narcotic. In ancient as in modern Greece, poppy-seed cakes were baked on festive occasions.³⁵ Poppy

31 S. Alexiou, ‘Η μινωϊκή θεὰ μεθ’ ὑψωμένων χειρῶν, pp. 188 ff.

32 The height of the statuette is 77.5 cm.

33 Ventris and Chadwick, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*, p. 35.

34 Theokritos VII 157.

35 Athenaios XIV 648 A; K. I. Kakoure, *Death and Resurrection*, p. 31.

heads appear among the symbols pointing to the Eleusinian Mysteries³⁶ or at least to the preparations for them. The ears of grain which in abbreviated form expressed the attained goal of the Mysteries are just as much in evidence. Nothing in the tradition suggests that the poppy had held as profound a significance in Eleusis as the grain. Still, the poppy may have performed a similar function, for example, that of evoking the image of the queen of the underworld. Nor is its use in the Eleusinian cakes, if not in the Eleusinian potion, the *kykeon*, to be excluded. This is uncertain. It seems probable that the Great Mother Goddess, who bore the names Rhea and Demeter, brought the poppy with her from her Cretan cult to Eleusis, and it is certain that in the Cretan cult sphere, opium was prepared from poppies.

The making of opium from poppies requires a special procedure. A pharmacobotanist discovered that the poppies on the head of the goddess figurine found in Gazi [15] reveal incisions which the artist colored more deeply than the rest of the flower to make them plainly visible.³⁷ This is a most significant discovery, because opium is obtained through such incisions. The coloring of the incisions was a way of displaying one of the goddess' gifts to her worshipers. They were reminded of experiences that they owed to her. This is concrete evidence that should not be blurred by vague reference to "medicines" (*pharmaka*) or to an unspecified ecstasy connected with the gifts of this goddess. What she bestowed through opium cannot have been essentially different in the Late Minoan period from today. What was it?

Here we find ourselves in the realm of pharmacological experience, and a large body of literature to which this specific experience has

36 See Kerényi, *Eleusis*, pp. 55, 74 f., 142 f., 184.

37 P. G. Kritikos and S. P. Papadaki, "The History of the Poppy and of Opium," p. 23.

given rise in recent times is at our disposal. This literature is far from unequivocal. The dosage, the mixture, and the form in which opium is taken can vary exceedingly, as can the mental states of those who have taken it, the reliability of their accounts, and the value of reports by outside observers. Nevertheless, some of these accounts seem significant in view of the archaeological observations disclosing a visionary element in the monuments of the Minoan religion. Opium induces much more than just sleep and dreams. The Greeks related that the Cretan Epimenides slept in a cave for fifty-seven years and thereby became a philosopher. They looked upon his wisdom as a miracle, not as an artificially induced state.³⁸ If this legend preserves a memory of the Late Minoan consumption of opium, it also shows that the knowledge of the actual effect of the *pharmakon* vanished with the Minoan culture. The *Odyssey* (IV 220) speaks of an Egyptian *pharmakon* against suffering and anger. Its effect seems comparable to the great euphoria that is an initial effect of opium; there is no mention of sleep.

Thus, we may turn to the modern classics on opium, from which I shall cite a few of the passages least conditioned by our own culture and closest to the atmosphere of Minoan art. "The ocean with its eternal breathing, on which however a great stillness brooded, symbolized my mind and the mood that then governed it . . . a festive peace. Here . . . all unrest gave way to a halcyon serenity."³⁹ These are De Quincey's words, quoted by Baudelaire. Baudelaire himself, in "Le Poison" (*Les Fleurs de Mal*), speaks of extending, not shattering, the limits of nature:

³⁸ Diogenes Laertius I 109.

³⁹ C. Baudelaire, *Les Paradis artificiels*, pp. 119–20: "L'Océan, avec sa respiration éternelle, mais couvé par un vaste calme, personnifiait mon esprit et l'influence qui le gouvernait alors . . . un repos ferie . . . et cependant toutes les inquiétudes étaient aplanies par un calme alcyonien."

*Opium enlarges the boundless,
Extends the unlimited,
Gives greater depth to time . . .*⁴⁰

Others, however, have spoken of a “world in which ‘one can hear the walk of an insect on the ground, the bruising of a flower.’”⁴¹ According to Cocteau, “opium is the only vegetable substance that communicates the vegetable state to us.”⁴²

It may be presumed that toward the end of the Late Minoan period, opium stimulated the visionary faculty and aroused visions which had earlier been obtained without opium. For a time, an artificially induced experience of transcendence in nature was able to replace the original experience. In the history of religions, periods of “strong medicine” usually occur when the simpler methods no longer suffice.⁴³ This development may be observed among the North American Indians. Originally mere fasting sufficed to induce visions. It was only in the decadent period of Indian culture that recourse was taken to peyotl, or mescaline. Earlier it was unnecessary.⁴⁴ This powerful drug had not always been an element in the style of Indian life, but it helped to maintain this style.

The same was true of opium in the Late Minoan period. It was

⁴⁰ Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, XLIX, 6–8 (*Oeuvres complètes*, I, 80).

⁴¹ See E. Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium and Kubla Khan*, pp. 41 and 312–13, note 27, citing M. H. Abrams, *The Milk of Paradise* (pp. 4, 63).

⁴² J. Cocteau, “L’Opium,” *Oeuvres complètes*, X, 113: “L’opium est la seule substance végétale qui nous communique l’état végétal”—or at least what the French poet understands by “vegetable state.”

⁴³ Kerényi, “Mescaline-Perioden der Religionsgeschichte,” pp. 201–203.

⁴⁴ See C. Mellen, “Reflections of a Peyote Eater,” p. 65: “At the very moment when the entire traditional fabric of the tribe was rendered useless [after defeat by the United States in the Indian Wars of the 1870’s] peyote was first used.”

INDEX

A superior figure following a page number indicates a footnote. A number followed by an asterisk indicates an illustration in the section after page 388.

- A
- Abrams, M. H., 26⁴¹
 Achilles, 74; shield of, 65, 86
 Adonis, cult of, 387
 Adrasteia, 44
 Aelian, 55¹¹, 77⁸⁸, 179¹⁵⁰, 185¹⁷¹, 186¹⁷³,
 189¹, 190⁴, 191^{6,7}
agalma, 308, 311
 Agamemnon, 236
 Aglaosthenes/Aglosthenes, 123²⁴⁵
 Agrai, Lesser Mysteries, 278, 295
 Agrania/Agriania/Agrionia, 178, 185
 Agripinilla (priestess), 352–354, 356, 363
 Aidos, 359
 Aigipan, 48, 375
 Aigisthos, 155
 Aigle, 102, 103, 104
 Aigosthena, 165, 166
 Aiora, 156, 157, 307
 Aischylos, 83, 219, 233, 328, 329, 330;
Eumenides, 89, 174¹³², 207⁴⁸, 210,
 213⁹⁹, 217⁹⁹, 234¹⁴⁴; *Semele*, 181¹⁵⁵; *The
 Suppliant Women*, 36⁸⁸
 Aison (vase painter), 91, 92
 Aissaoua, 85
 Aitolia, 75
 Aix (son of Python), 48
 Akademeia/Akademios, 166
 Akousilaos, 187¹⁷⁰
 Aktaion, 248
 Akurgal, E., 256¹⁰⁸
 Aletis (Erigone), 154, 158
 Alexiou, S., 9⁷, 12¹³, 20²⁵, 21²⁸, 23³¹
 Alfieri, N., 280²⁹
 Alkaios, 84¹¹⁵, 187, 205⁴³
Alkmeonis, 83
 Alkyonic Sea, 311
 all-souls, feast of, 364
Alpha canis, 73
 Alphaeios River, 181, 182, 184
 Altamura painter, 280, 290
 Althaia, 76, 314, 100*
- Altheim, F., 122²⁴⁰
 Amandry, P., 207⁴⁹, 226¹¹¹, 227^{114,115},
 228¹²¹, 229^{124,128}, 234¹⁴⁵
 Amasis painter, 88, 169–170
 amniotic fluid, 34
 Amorgos, 298
 Ampelos (epithet), 63
 Amphietes, 198, 199, 213
 Amphiktyon, 143, 144, 164
 Amphissa, 220
 Amphitrite, 9
 Anakreon, 66⁴³, 365–366
 Ananios, 65⁸⁸
 Andraea, B., 123²⁴⁸
 Andromachos, 60–61
 Andros, 166¹⁰⁴, 299
 animals: caught alive, 82–89; caught in
 net, 87–88; in comedies, 341–342; imag-
 inary, 81; raw meat of, eaten, 84–89,
 115, 203; torn in pieces, 84, 85, 88, 115,
 142, 147, 203, 235, 247
 Anthedon, 184
 Anthesteria, 157, 168, 170, 199, 200, 201,
 234, 292, 295, 300–302, 303^{91,92}, 315,
 324, 325, 349, 361, 378; influence in
 Italy, 363, 364, 366; tragedy related to,
 316, 317
 Anthesterion (month), 296, 300, 304
Anthologia Graeca, 333¹⁸⁴
Anthologia Palatina, 54⁹, 103¹⁸², 185¹⁷⁰,
 249¹⁵⁰, 323¹⁵⁶
 Antigonus Carystius, 45⁶³
 Antinoë, 248
 Antonines, 349, 381
 Antoninus Liberalis, 30⁷, 44⁵⁹, 179¹⁴⁹,
 245¹⁷¹
 Apellaios (month), 205
 Aphrodite, 109²⁰⁶, 186, 371; Ariadne as,
 106–107; Urania, 197²⁵
apodemia, 209, 216
 Apollo, 48–49, 103, 106, 108, 150, 219,
 224, 328; birth, 106¹⁹⁷; birthday, 206,
 216; at Delphi, 205–213, 216, 217, 230,

- Apollo (*cont.*)
231, 238; and Delphic oracle, 229, 232;
Dionysos connected with, 233, 261;
epiphany of, 140; Phoibos, 210; Pythios,
213, 229, 230; on tripod, 232, 63 *
- Apollodoros, 47⁷⁶, 105^{162 190}, 152⁶³, 153⁶⁹,
165¹⁰⁰, 176¹³⁰, 185^{170 171 172}, 186^{173 175},
187¹⁷⁶, 188¹⁸⁸, 246¹⁷², 360^{241 248}
- Apollonius Rhodius, 31¹², 39⁴⁴, 57²⁸,
256¹⁹⁶
- aporrheton*, 226, 247
- aporrhetos thysia*, 33
- Arabs, 85, 256, 257
- Araña, cave painting, 35
- Aratos, 42^{58 54}, 88, 109²⁰⁸
- arcana*, 376
- Archebakchos, 354
- Archelaos, 39–40
- archiboukolos*, 351, 353
- Archilokos, 305–306
- archimystes*, 351
- archon basileus*, 312, 353; drama and,
332, 335; wife of, *see* queen of Athens
- Arcturus, 74
- Aretaios, 273–274, 309
- Argonauts, 57, 256
- Argos, 180, 197²⁶; Dionysian religion in,
174, 176, 177, 178, 180, 181, 184–188,
203
- Ariadne, xxv, 89–125, 136, 197²⁶, 360,
382, 35 *, 36 *, 141 *; as Aphrodite,
106–107; archetype of soul, 124–125;
child or children of, 108; death of, 103,
106–107, 157, 277; Dionysos and, 101–
103, 107–125; elevation to heavens,
123–124, 270, 385–387, 146 *; Erigone
as, 155, 307; festivals of, 192; in heav-
enly marriage, 369–370, 124 *, 125 *;
marriage with Dionysos, 109–110, 114,
121–123, 384; mistress of the labyrinth,
90, 95, 98–99, 101, 102, 105, 106, 107,
118; mother of Dionysos, 108, 114, 119;
names and epithets, 99, 103–104; The-
seus and, 98, 101–103, 107, 108, 109,
120, 123; tomb of, 103, 180, 194;
wreath of, 109–110, 368, 369
- Arias, P. E., 280²⁰
- Aridela (Ariadne), 104, 113, 116, 124
- Arion, 317¹²⁷
- Aristaios, 39, 40, 77
- Aristides, 168¹⁰⁶, 340²⁰¹
- Aristonous Corinthius, 45⁶⁴, 214⁷⁰
- Aristophanes, 333; *Acharnians*, 71⁵⁶,
164^{96 97}, 274⁵, 296⁷³, 303⁹², 304⁶⁵,
312^{126 128}, 334¹⁵⁰, quoted, 337–339; *Birds*,
338, 341; *Ecclesiazusae*, 341; *Frogs*, 79,
279²³, 292, 304⁹⁸, 336¹⁰³, 375²⁸⁷,
Knights, 341; *Lysistrata*, 331, 340, 343;
Peace, 151, 152⁶¹; *Plutus*, 229^{128 129},
Thesmophoriazusae, 340–341; *Wasps*,
328¹⁷⁴, 336¹⁹⁴, 351²¹⁶
- Aristotle, 158, 299–300, 311; *Anecdota
problemata*, 246–247, 250¹⁸¹; *Athenien-
sium Respublica*, 308¹¹³, 309–310; *De
generatione animalium*, xxxiii *; *Histo-
ria animalium*, 34; *Metaphysics*, 37;
Poetics, 318, 321, 325–326, 332; *Poli-
tics*, 300⁶²
- ark/*arca*, 375, 376
- Arnobius, 117²²⁰, 276¹⁴, 311¹²²
- arrheta hiera*, 293, 310
- arrheton*, 226, 247, 261
- arrival of a god, *see* *epidemia*
- Artemis, 15, 107, 133, 184, 209; Apancho-
mene (hanged), 106, 157; Ariadne and,
98, 101, 103, 106, 108–109; sanctuary
at Brauron, 151, 155
- Asia Minor, 50, 209, 277; Great Mother
religion, 275–276; myth of grapevine,
58–60
- Asine, 187
- Asklepios, birth of, 103, 104, 106
- askoliasmos*, 312, 324
- askos*, 38
- Asterios/Asterion, 105
- Astour, M. C., 146⁴⁴, 153⁶⁵
- Athamas, 246
- Athena, 259, 260; born from head of Zeus,
278; Salpinx, 174¹⁰⁰; with Theseus and
Dionysos, 102, 36 *; with Theseus and
Minotaur, 91, 28 *, 29 *
- Athenagoras, 111, 112
- Athenaios, 33²⁰, 60²⁰, 123²⁴⁵, 144³⁵, 146⁴²,
158⁹², 163⁹², 166¹⁰⁴, 181¹⁵⁸, 192⁹,
250¹⁸¹, 287⁴², 291⁵¹, 306¹⁰⁴, 312¹²⁷,
316¹³⁵, 324¹⁸⁰, 378²⁰⁸
- Athens, 30, 76; Akademeia, 166, 173, 175,
182¹⁸¹, 320; Akropolis, 92; Boukoleion,

- 307–311, 313, 314, 315, 350, 351, 352, 362, 373; Dionysian festivals, *see* festivals; Dionysian religion in, 141, 143–144, 193, 199, 201, 278, 279; Dionysos arrives in, 144, 146, 160–175; Gerairai, *see* Gerairai; image of Dionysos brought to, 163–164, 166–167, 172, 175; images (idols) of Dionysos used in, 281–286, 76A*–84*; Lenaion, 162, 283, 298–299, 336; Panathenaia, 167; Parthenon graffito, 97, 33*; participation in Delphic rites, 141, 213, 219; procession before Eleusinian Mysteries, 78–79; processions of Dionysos, 166–175, 296; Pythion, 213; Sabazios cult in, 275; Small Mitropolis, 319, 103*; springs, 291, 292; swamps, 291, 292; temple of Dionysos Lemnaios, 291–293, 302; theater, 171, 172, sacrifice in, 319–320, 325; Thesmothetion, 312
- Atlantes, 387
- Atthidographes, 143²²
- Attica, Dionysian religion in, 141–160, 200, 201
- Attis, 275, 277
- ax, double, 190–193
- B
- Bacchanalia, 355, 357, 363
- bacchantes, *see* maenads
- Bachofen, J. J., 129–130, 132, 134, 254¹⁹¹, 290⁴⁸, 365²⁰¹
- Bakcheia, 200
- Bakcheutas (epithet), 291, 294
- bakchoi/bakchai, 354
- Bakchos/Bacchos/Bakcheus/Bakchios, 67, 123, 233, 251
- Bakchylides, 187¹⁷⁰
- barley, 24, 53
- Bartocchi, F., 368²⁰⁰
- basilinna, 362
- basket, *see* cista mystica; liknon
- Bassarai, 233
- Bassus, Cassianus, 40
- bathron, 232, 63*
- Baudelaire, C., 25–26
- Bayard, L., 208⁵⁴
- bears, 48
- bearskin, 48
- Beaufort, F., 46⁷¹
- Beazley, J. D., 61²⁹, 75⁷⁸, 91¹⁴⁰, 102¹⁷⁷, 284⁸⁵, 340²⁰²
- Becatti, G., 375²⁸⁵
- Bechtel, F., 113²²³, 224¹⁰⁵
- beer, 36, 53
- bees, 42–43; awakening of, 38–41, 43, 50; in cave, 30–31; prophetesses as, 49
- Beethoven, L. van, 135
- beetle, sacred, 9
- Bekker, I., 94¹⁸¹, 145⁴¹, 308²¹⁸
- Bema of Phaidros, 171
- Bendinelli, G., 66²⁹
- Benton, S., 84¹¹²
- Berthelot, M., 242¹⁶⁴
- Bethe, E., 172¹²⁴
- Bezold, C., 386³²³
- Bible, *see* New Testament; Old Testament
- Bieber, M., 328¹⁷³
- Bielefeld, E., 366²⁸⁵
- biologos, xxxiii
- bios, 190⁴, 349, 363, 374; zoë distinguished from, xxviii, xxxi–xxxvii
- birds, 372; persons disguised as, 341
- birth: in death, 107–108; premature, 106, 106¹⁹⁷, 108, 294–295
- Bischoff, E., 30⁴, 206⁴⁴
- Blegen, C. W., 263²¹⁷
- blood, overflowing of, 30, 33, 34, 38
- Boehm, F., 156⁷⁴
- Boeotia, 141, 178, 179, 185, 192, 218
- Boëthius, A., 213⁷⁰
- boiled meat, 246–247, 250; in milk, 252–256
- Boll, F., 215⁷⁷, 386³²³
- Bougenes (epithet), 55
- Bougonia, 40
- Boukoleion, *see* Athens, Boukoleion
- boukouloi, 351–353, 356
- bouplex, 176–177
- Bourguet, É., 194¹⁷, 197²⁸, 217⁸⁷
- Bousquet, J., 236¹⁵³
- Bowra, C. M., 74⁷², 190⁴, 305¹⁰⁸, 318¹³⁰
- boy/boys: fawn with, 319, 102*; in festivals, 305–309, 314, 93*, 98*; goats with, 318–319, 101*; initiation, 268–269, 358, 359, 373–377; in mysteries, 357, 358, 360

- Boyancé, P., 360²⁴², 373²⁸⁸, 386³²⁴
 Bozzano, E., 227¹¹⁷
 Brasiai, 183
 Brauron, 151, 152, 155
 Brindisi disk, 385–387, 146 *
 Brindisi pitcher, 364–365, 367, 372, 386, 117 *
 Britomartis, 82, 84, 87
 Bromios (epithet), 291, 294
 Brommer, F., 297⁷⁴
 Brueckner, A., 300⁸⁸
 Bruel, R., 85¹¹⁸
 Brugsch, H., 293⁶⁰
 Buber, M., 304⁸⁴
 bull/bulls, 52, 54–55; “bull’s foot,” 182, 183, 308; caught in nets, 87; Dionysos as bull god, 52, 54–55, 86–87, 308; as prize, 315–316; raw meat of, eaten, 84, 86, 115; religious significance of, 55, 115–118; as sacrifice, 173, 180, 182, 190, 203, 213, 236, 315–316, 318, 61A *; snake and, 117; torn in pieces, 84, 115, 142, 203; on wine vessels, 53–55, 20 *
 bull game, 12, 84, 2 *, 3A, 3B
 Burkert, W., 318¹⁴¹, 320¹⁶⁰
 Buschor, E., 97¹⁶², 167¹⁰⁵, 288⁴⁸, 307¹¹²
 butterfly, 254
 Bysios (month), 206, 216, 217, 222, 233, 235
- C
- Caelius Apicius, 253¹⁸⁷
 calendar: Athenian, 278, 294, 295, 319, 378; Delphic, 205–206; Egyptian, 29; Greek, 30, 37; Julian, 29, 299
 calf, 54–55, 119, 190–191, 270
 Calpurni Pisones family, 381–382
 Calza, G., 375²⁸⁴, 376²⁸⁹
 Canaanites, 255
 Cantarella, R., 84¹¹⁶
 Carian/Karios, 153
 Caskey, J. L., 191⁸
 cattle: sacrifice of, 40–41, 54, 55, 115–116, 190–191, 270; wild, 87; *see also* bull
 caves, 17–19, 46, 110, 113, 114, 118, 223–224; bees in, 30–31; stalactites and stalagmites in, 18–19
 Ceglie, 88
 centaurs, 254
 Chadwick, J., 23⁸⁸, 53², 54⁸, 56¹⁸, 71⁵⁷, 100¹⁹⁶, 264²²⁰
 Chamaileon, 330
 Charites (Graces), 182–183; terrible (*phoberai*), 333
 child: bull as, 116–120; Divine, *see* Divine Child; horned, 114, 115, 245, 270; sacrifice of, 179, 189, 269–270, 379
 childbirth, 132, 133
 children: exposure of, 348; in festivals, 305–307, 317, 93 *; in New Comedy, 344, 347; on sarcophagus, 363, 115 *
 choëis (sing.: chous), 156, 170, 289, 290, 292, 295⁶⁰, 303, 305–308, 314, 318; buried with the dead, 363–365, 374
 Choëis Day, 156, 169, 170, 174, 292, 293, 300, 303–315, 374, 387; drinking contest, 312, 338; marriage ceremony, 308–312; preparations for, 307–308; women in, 312–315
 Choreia, 177
 choruses, 321; in comedy, 332, 333, 334, 339–342; dithyrambic, 305, 92A *; of satyrs, 325; tragic, 317, 331
 Christianity, 387; Jesus as true vine, 257–258; wine, significance of, 258
 Christmas, 299
 Chthonios (epithet), 199
 Chytroi, 304, 315
 Cilicia, 46, 47
 circumcision, 270
cista mystica, 260, 383
 Clement of Alexandria, 66⁴², 181¹⁰⁷, 196⁸², 202³⁷, 267, 276–277, 311¹²⁴
 Cocteau, J., 26
 Cocullo, 61
 Codex Theodosianus, 294
 Colchians, 270
 Collitz, H., 113²²⁸, 224¹⁰⁵
 Columella, 39–40
 column, 17; as idol, with mask, 281–284, 76A *–76C *; phallic, 371–373
 comedy, 168, 288, 297, 330–348; Middle, 343; New, 319, 335, 344, 347, 348,

- 349; Old, 335, 336–337, 339, 341, 342, 343, 351; satyr plays, 324–325, 330
 Cook, A. B., 31⁸, 123²¹⁶, 231¹³¹, 232^{137 138}
 Cornutus, 67
 corona borealis, 109
cortina, 230–231
 cosmos, 384–388, 144^{*}–146^{*}
 Council of Constantinople, Second (Trullanum), 67
 Courby, F., 228¹²⁰
 Cretan-Minoan art, 5–9, 62, 65, 115; gesture in, 10–14, 20–22
 Cretan-Minoan culture and religion, 50, 77, 261, 269; Apollo in, 212; bulls in, 54–55, 115–118; Dionysos in, xxvi–xxvii, 27–28, 50, 52–56, 67–68, 103, 107, 110, 113, 115, 117, 119, 138, 190, 191, 193, 198, 262–263; languages, 208; visions in, 14–20; wine in, 53–58
 Cretan writing, 11, 68–69; Linear B, xxvi, 34, 56
 Crete, 49, 184, 252, 276; Delphic cult from, 50; enthronement ritual in, 263, 264; hunting in, 82–83; Orion associated with, 41–43; viticulture in, 55–58; Zeus born in, 30–33, 113, 119, 266
 cruciform structure, cult object, 305, 361²⁴⁴, 378
 Cumae, xxv
 Cumont, F., 256–257, 363²²⁵
 cupids, *see* Eroses
 Curtius, L., 147⁴⁷, 314¹³³, 360^{238 240}
 Cyprus, 298, 299
- D
- Dadophoriae, 294
 Dadophorios (month), 215, 217
 Dadouchos, 279
 Daidalidai, 100
 Daidalos, 98–101
 Dakaris, S. J., 230¹²⁹
 Danaos, 178, 184
 dance, 13, 16; in Dionysian religion, 146, 214, 271–272, 352, 367; in drama, 321, 332, 333; in Eleusinian Mysteries, 93; of Korybantes or Kouretes, 264–266, 269; in labyrinth, 94, 97–101, 107, 118; in Sabazios mysteries, 288, 88B^{*}–88D^{*}; of Thyiades on Parnassos, 218–219, 222
 Daphni, 213
 Daux, G., 236¹³³
 Dawkins, R. M., 106¹⁹⁷
 death, 349–350; birth in, 107–108; life after, 349, 364–373, 118^{*}–131B^{*}; life contrasted with, xxxiv, xxxv; struggle with, 8; vases buried with the dead, 363–365, 374
 Deecke, W., 174¹³⁰
 deerskin, 147, 218, 380
 Delamarre, J., 298⁷⁵
 Delos, 150, 151, 166¹⁰⁴
 Delphi, 30, 141, 188, 197, 261; Apollo at, 205–213, 216, 217, 230, 231; calendar, 205–206; Dionysian religion, 141–142, 204–237, 238, 316; Dionysion, 223, 236; dragon, *see* Python; *omphalos*, 207, 228; oracle, 207–208, 210, 211, 212, 216, 224, 228–230, 232–236; temple of Apollo, 226, 228; Thyiades, *see* Thyiades; Thyiai, 217–218; tomb of Dionysos, 49, 232–233; tripod, 211, 223, 226, 228–232, 233¹³⁸, 235, 261, 62^{*}, 63^{*}
 Delphyne, 48, 211
 Delvoyé, C., 160⁸⁷
 Demargne, P., 72⁸⁰
 Demeter, 82–83, 104, 110–112, 114, 116, 124, 150, 194, 248, 249, 387
 Demokritos, 40
 Demosthenes, *De corona*, xxxiii⁵, 60²⁰, 363²¹²
 Deo (Demeter), 111
 de Quincey, Thomas, 25
 Deubner, L., xxvii, 145^{38 41}, 170¹¹⁰, 171¹¹⁸, 279²³, 284³⁴, 300^{84 85}, 302⁸⁸, 304⁸⁶, 306¹⁰⁸, 312¹²⁵, 319¹⁴⁷, 335¹⁸⁰, 336¹⁹¹, 361²⁴⁸
 Deukalion, 75, 235
 Dia, 101, 109, 121–122
diadoche, 210
 Didyma, 90–91
 Diehl, E., 45⁴⁴, 65³⁸, 66⁴³, 192¹⁰, 365²⁰²
 Diels, H., 60²⁷, 94¹⁰², 110²¹⁰, 240¹⁵⁸
 Dieterich, A., 117²²⁹, 251¹⁸³, 268²⁴¹, 351^{215 217 218}
 Dikte Cave, 33, 266

- Dikte mountains, 87
 Dimetor (epithet), 277
 Dindorf, W., 168¹⁰⁹
 Dindymion, Mt., 57, 256
 Diodorus Siculus, xxxiv⁹, xxxv¹⁰, 8⁴, 39⁴², 45⁶⁷, 53⁵, 83¹⁰⁹, 87¹²⁴, 102¹⁷⁵, 106¹⁹⁷, 110, 111, 120²³⁷, 121²³⁸, 124²⁴⁷, 138¹⁹, 186¹⁷⁵, 197, 200, 233¹⁴², 248–249, 270²³⁰, 360²⁴³, 383
 Diogenes Laertius, 25⁸⁸
 Dion Chrysostomos, 243¹⁶⁵
 Dionysia, Great, 168, 172, 173, 199, 296, 309, 312, 316, 381; drama in, 335, 349; tragedy originated in, 316–318, 322, 325–326
 Dionysia, rural, 296–297, 321, 335–336, 338
 Dionysian, the, 134, 138
 Dionysian religion, 45, 50–51, 52–68; Cretan origin, *see* Cretan-Minoan culture and religion; Dionysian baroque, 381, 382; historical interpretations of, 129–139; of late antiquity, 349–388; mysteries, *see* mysteries, Dionysian; names in, 68–71; Orphism and, 240–245, 262–272; resistance to, 175–179, 184–188; sarcophagi representing, 377–385, 137*–142*, 144*, 145*; Semitic, 256–257; signs of, 52; syncretism, 381, 383; universalism, 387–388
 Dionysios of Argos, 318¹⁴²
 Dionysios Perigetes, 231¹³¹
 Dionysios Thrax, 334¹⁵⁵
 Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 310¹²⁰
 Dionysodoros, 195³⁰
 Dionysodotes (Apollo), 212
 Dionysos, xxvi–xxviii; absent for twelve months, 198–199; with alter ego, 280, 290, 75*; Apollo connected with, 233, 261; archetype of *zoë*, 124–125; Ariadne and, 101–103, 107–125; Ariadne his mother, 108, 114, 119; arrivals of, 139–188, 39A*, 39B*, 40*, 41*; awakening of, 44, 49, 199–202, 212, 217, 222–223, 226; birth in Eleusinian Mysteries, 278, 279, 295; birthday of, 279, 299, 336, 343; born from thigh of Zeus, 75, 273–280, 295, 378, 73*, 74*; born in Ikaros, 152; born in Thebes, 143; as bull god, 52, 54–55, 86–87, 308; as child: initiation, 374–376, 132A*–132C*, killed by guardians, 240–246, 259, 263, 265–269, 373–374, riding on goat, 265, 270, 66C*, in vine, 270–272, 67*, *see also* Divine Child; of Crete (Kresios), 103, 107, 110, 119, 180; “crusher of men,” 190; Demeter his mother, 249; dismemberment, 66, 67, 110–111, 212, 213, 217, 223, 231, 235, 245, 248, 256, 261, 263; dual nature, 381–384; elevation to heavens, 123–124, 270, 385–387, 146*; enthronement, 262–272, 80*, 81*, 98*; Erigone and, 155, 158, 44*; and female companion, 364–365, 386, 117*; flight and pursuit of, 178; heavenly marriage of women with, 366–373; as herm, 307, 380–381, 140*; honey associated with, 31, 49; Horai with, 144, 250, 37*; as hunter, 87–89, 26*; image of, brought to Athens, 163–164, 166–167, 172, 175; images (idols) used in Athens, 281–286, 305, 361²⁴¹, 76A*–84*; ivy associated with, 62–64, 196; kid identified with, 245, 246, 256; light associated with, 74, 75, 77–78, 279; as “lord of the wild beasts,” 81–82, 84, 203, 25*; marriage with Ariadne, 109–110, 114, 121–123, 384; marriage with queen of Athens, 293, 300, 301, 307–312, 361; in mysteries, impersonated, 354–355, 357, 360–362; names and epithets, 63, 67, 69, 83, 84, 85, 123, 163, 198, 203, 231, 245, 277, 291, 294, 301; Nietzsche’s view of, xxiii–xxiv, 324, 329; as old man, 382–384, 142*, 144*, 145*; Oriental, 81; Persephone his mother, 83, 110–114, 248, 256, 265, 279; pirates capture him, 152, 167; Poseidon and, 297, 90*; as ruler of world (Dionysian era), 242, 244–245, 263, 265; as sacrificial victim, 203, 241–261, *see also* suffering god; scenes from life of, 66A*–66E*; second birth, 259; Semele his mother, 106–108, 110, 120, 161⁸⁸, 181, 184, 185, 194, 256, 279, 295, 306, 378; statues of, at Thebes, 195–196; third birth of, 270; three

- phases of his myth, 119–121; tomb at Delphi, 49, 232–233; in underworld, 180–182, 199–200, 256, 292, 303, 304, 311; as wine god, *see* wine; wine-making invented by, 57–60, 142–143; year of, *see* *trieteris*; Zeus his father, 69, 83, 106, 110–114
- Dioskorides, 323¹⁰⁶
- Dioskouroi, 387
- Diosphos painter, 75⁷³, 279, 280
- dischi sacri*, 385–387, 146^{*}
- dithyramb/*dithyrambos*, 198–199, 215, 216, 301, 305–306, 315–316; singers, 305, 92A^{*}; tragedy related to, 317–318, 321–322, 326
- Dithyrambos (epithet), 218, 291, 294, 301, 305, 306
- Divine Child, 45, 84; Dionysos, 55, 58, 244, 245, 246, 263, 265–272, 284, 299, 336, 348; in Eleusinian Mysteries, 78, 118, 278, 295; Liknites, *see* Liknites; Zeus, 30–33
- Dodds, E. R., 85¹¹⁸, 138²¹, 139²², 158⁸⁰, 176¹³⁸, 227¹¹⁴
- Dodona, 208, 230¹²⁰
- Doliche, 256
- Dolukbaba, 256
- domina/matrona*, 352, 355–358, 361, 362, 372
- Dominic, St., 61
- Donus/Donusia, 122
- Dorians, 332, 340
- double ax, 190–193
- Drachmann, A. B., 211⁸²
- drama, 197; Dionysos and, xxiv, xxv, 296, 327–330, 331, 333, 334, 336, 348; systole and diastole in, 332, 333; *see also* comedy; tragedy
- Drios, Mt., 123
- drinking, 35, 36, 131, 135–137, 317; contest on Choë's Day, 312, 338; in mysteries, 361–363
- Dümmler, F., 167¹⁰⁷
- Dusares, 256–257
- E
- Earth Goddess, *see* Gaia
- Ebert, M., 35²⁰
- Edmonds, J. M., xxxii^a, 168¹¹, 300⁸⁵, 343^{205 206}, 347²⁰⁸, 348²¹⁰, 351²¹⁷
- Edwards, M. W., 27⁴⁶, 61²⁰
- egg as offering, 369
- Egger, R., 222⁸⁴
- Egypt, 43, 67, 72, 73, 77, 167, 270; beer, 36; festival of light, 299; viticulture, 56–57; year, beginning of, 29, 73
- Eileithyia, 32, 133, 378; cave of, 18
- Eilmann, R., 92¹⁴⁸
- Eiraphion (month), 298
- Eiraphiotes (epithet), 275, 277, 298
- Eisele, T., 275¹⁰
- Eisler, R., 85¹²⁰
- Elaphebolion (month), 296, 316, 319, 379, 381
- Elderkin, G. W., 380⁸⁰⁸
- Eleusinian Mysteries, 33, 108, 118, 124, 187, 295, 350; dances, 93; Divine Child, 78, 118, 278, 279, 295; drink (*kykeon*), 24, 53; poppies as symbols, 24; procession before, 78–79
- Eleusis, 213
- Eleuther/Eleutheros/Eleuthereus (Dionysos), 69, 163, 172, 175, 296, 319, 320
- Eleuther, daughters of, 163, 165
- Eleutherai (place), 163, 165, 172, 175, 201, 317
- Elis, 183, 190, 197, 293; Sixteen Women, 69, 181, 184, 190², 197, 217, 293, 308, 327; song of women, 141, 181–182
- Elworthy, F. T., 385³²²
- emasculation, 275–277, 285, 286
- Enorches (epithet), 286
- enthousiasmos*, 200
- enthronement, 262–272, 80^{*}, 81^{*}, 98^{*}
- epheboi, 145, 162, 173
- Ephyra, 230
- Epicharmos, 332
- Epidauros, 30
- epidemia*, 139, 140, 141, 170–171, 205, 209
- Epikrates, xxxii^a
- Epimenides, 25, 110²¹⁰
- Epiphany (Christian), 299
- epiphany, 9, 13, 14¹⁶, 16, 17, 140, 159; of Dionysos, 124, 139, 140–141, 168, 200, 202; in Eleusinian Mysteries, 278; gestures and, 21–22, 9^{*}–12^{*}

- epithema*, 229, 232
Eratosthenes, 41⁵¹, 42⁵⁰, 149, 152, 153, 155, 323, 324¹⁵⁸
Erigone, 148, 149, 154–161, 307, 323, 44^{*}
Eriphos (epithet), 245
Erman, A., 56¹⁹, 167¹⁰⁷
Eros, 297, 386; as guide of souls, 366, 368, 369, 370, 372, 121^{*}, 125^{*}; throwing ball, 365–366, 118^{*}
Eroses (cupids), 66, 123²³³, 254, 64B^{*}
Etruria, 355, 364
Etruscans, 174, 267, 371
Etymologicum Gudianum, 82¹⁰⁰, 195²⁰, 319¹⁴⁸
Etymologicum Magnum, 83¹¹⁰
Euanthes (epithet), 291, 294, 301
Eudocia, 228¹²¹
Euenos, 249¹⁸⁰
Euhemerism, 259
Euhemerios, 232¹³⁸
Euhias, 219
Euioi (epithet), 67
Euoi (cry), 59, 251
Euphorion, 248¹⁷⁸, 268
Euripides, 33¹⁰, 233, 331, 341; *Antiope*, 196²², *Bacchae*, 31¹⁰¹¹, 78⁸⁸, 89, 131⁶, 136, 158⁸⁰, 192–193, 194, 203, 237, 306¹⁰⁵, 329; *Cretan Men*, 84, 85, 86, 243¹⁸⁷; *Cyclops*, 131⁶, 314¹⁸³; *Helen*, 112²²¹; *Heraclidae*, 174¹³²; *Hippolytus*, 109; *Hypsipyle*, 218⁸⁰; *Ion*, 214⁷⁵, 222, 226, 227¹¹⁵; *Iphigenia in Tauris*, 210, 211^{61 62}; *Lykymnios*, 233; *Orestes*, 37²⁹; *Phoenissae*, 174¹³², 196^{28 24}; *Rhesus*, 132
Europa, 105, 116
Euryale, 41–42
Eusebios, 143⁸², 187¹⁷⁷
Eustathius, 41⁶⁰
Evans, Sir A. J., 5, 7³, 8⁴, 17²⁰, 53, 62, 81⁸⁸, 95, 101¹⁷³, 152⁸⁴, 159⁸⁵, 263²¹⁷
Exekias, 167
- F
- Fallmerayer, J. P., 58²⁴
Farnell, L. R., 113²²², 119
Faure, P., 18^{21 22}, 19²⁴, 101¹⁷²
Fauth, W., 228¹²¹, 262²¹²
fawn, 254, 319, 64C^{*}, 102^{*}
fermentation, 34, 38
festivals, 290–315; Agrionia, 178, 185; Aiora, 156, 157, 307; all-souls, 364; of Ariadne, 192; Chytroi, 304, 315; of new wine, 291–294, 296, 297, 302⁸⁰; Oschophoria, 102, 144–146, 162; Panathenaia, 167, Panegyreis, 197; of *pentaeteris*, 151–152; Pithoigia, 302–303; Thyaia, 183, 184¹⁰⁸, 190; of *trieteris*, 141–142, 199–202; see also Anthesteria; Choëis Day; Dionysia; Lenaia
fig tree or wood, 260, 274, 282
fire in ceremonies, 33, 77, 78
Firmicus Maternus, 83¹⁰⁰, 84¹¹³, 117²²⁰, 253¹⁸⁶, 260²⁰⁷
five-year cycle/*pentaeteris*, 37, 38, 151–152
flute-playing, 66–67, 271, 305, 68^{*}–70^{*}, 92A^{*}
Fontenrose, J., 211⁶³
Forsdyke, J., 72⁸²
Foucart, P., 144³⁷
Foucher, L., 94¹⁴⁹
Fowler, W. W., 300⁸⁰
François Vase, 144, 37^{*}
Frazer, Sir J. G., xxvii, 35²⁷, 40⁴⁹, 45⁷⁰, 61²⁸, 157⁷⁰, 183¹⁶⁷, 360²⁴¹
Freud, S., 157⁸⁰, 204⁴¹
Frickenhaus, A., 166¹⁰⁴, 167¹⁰⁵, 170¹¹⁶, 171¹¹⁹, 172¹²³, 173¹²⁶, 174¹³⁸, 281²⁸, 282²⁰, 283^{33 34}, 284³⁵
Frisk, H., 99¹⁶⁵
Fuchs, W., 254¹⁸⁸
Fuhrmann, H., 75⁷³, 280²⁷
Furlani, G., 47⁷⁵
Furtwängler, A., 144³⁴, 157⁸⁰, 263²¹⁸
- G
- Gaia/Ga/Ge, 83, 207, 210
Galen, 52¹, 60²⁷
Gamalion (month), 296, 298–299
gamos, 309–310, 311, 369
Garstang, J., 46⁷³, 257¹⁸⁸
Gaster, T. H., 255
Gerairai, 69, 217, 284, 293, 298, 301, 307, 308, 309, 336
gesture, 10–14, 20–22

- ghosts, 303–304
 Giessen amphora, 371–373, 130A *–130F *
 Gillen, F. J., 35²⁷
 girls, initiation of, 377; *see also* children
 Girodet, A.-L., 158⁸³
 Gjerstad, E., 304³⁷
 goat/kid, 76, 80, 87–88, 24 *; children with, 318–319, 101 *; Dionysos as kid, 245, 246, 256; Dionysos riding on, 265, 270, 66c *; kid boiled in milk, 252–256; male organ in sacrifices, 260; as prize, 320, 323; sacrifice of, 202³⁷, 203, 233–235, 249, 250, 252–256, 270, 281, 318–324, 333, 351, 364, 76B *, 76c *, 103 *; tragedy related to, 318–324, 333; wild, 87
 “goddess mounting her chariot,” 161, 161⁸⁸, 44 *, 46 *, 47 *
 Goethe, J. W. von, 225¹⁰⁶
 Goetze, A., 47⁷⁵
 Graef, B., 92^{141 142}, 171¹²⁰
 Graeven, H., 265²²⁴
 grapes/grapevines, 64–65; Arabic cult of, 257; Dionysos as child in vine, 270–272, 67 *; harvest, 65, 74; Jesus as true vine, 257–258; mother of grape or wine, 256, 257; myths of origin, 58–60, 75–76; sacrifice for vines, 249–252; seeds found in excavations, 51; treading, 59–60, 65–66; viticulture, 50, 51, 55–60
 Great Goddess, 7–8, 57–58, 111, 133, 207, 214, 256, 360; Ariadne as, 90, 99, 106, 107, 124; Artemis as, 155; bull game and, 12–13; Hera as, 184, 187; in Sabazioz mysteries, 288, 88A *; on seal, 7, 13, 16, 1 *
 Great Mother, 8, 24, 264, 269, 275–276
 Groenewegen-Frankfort, H. A., 10⁸
 Guarducci, M., 45⁶⁰
 Gundel, W., 386³²³
- H
- Hades (god), *see* Plouton
 Hades (place), *see* underworld
 Hadrumentum, mosaic, 94, 31 *
 Hagia Triada, 159; frescoes, 62; Harvester Vase, 72; sarcophagus, 54, 21A *, 21B *
 Haliai, 177
 Halliday, W. R., 182¹⁰⁰
 hanging, 106, 157, 158
 Hanslik, R., 103¹⁸²
 hares, 88–89
 Harmonia, 196²⁵
 Harpokrates, 284
 Harpokration, 147⁴⁷
 Harrison, J. E., 85¹¹⁸, 266²²⁹, 268²⁴², 303⁹¹
 Haspels, C. H. E., 75⁷³, 92¹⁴³, 161⁸⁸
 Hastings, J., 255¹⁹²
 Hauser, F., 229¹²⁷
 Head, B. V., 192¹¹
 head, severed, 267
 headbands, 280, 314, 367
 heart, 261; in sacrifices, 231, 259–260
 Hebe, 116
 Hegel, G. W. F., 204
 Hekataios, 45⁶⁸, 75–76
 Helbig, W., 97¹⁰¹, 122²⁴³, 254¹⁹⁰
 Helen, 157
 Heliodoros, 213⁶⁹
 Heller, J. L., 96¹⁵⁷, 97¹⁰²
 Helm, R., 143³²
 Hepding, H., 275¹³
 Hephaistos, 65, 98
 Hera, 116, 133, 181, 184, 242; Dionysos and, 187, 246, 267, 279; marriage with Zeus, 300; punishes daughters of Proitos, 186–187
 Herakleion, Archaeological Museum, 5, 19, 53⁷
 Herakleitos of Ephesos, 239–240
 Herakleitic knot, 112
 Herakles, 180, 213⁷⁰, 295⁶⁹, 318
 Herbig, R., 356, 356²³¹, 357, 358, 359²³⁰, 360²³⁹, 361^{245 246}
 herm, 307, 380–381, 140 *
 Hermes, 48, 195, 246, 375, 378, 386; guardian of the dead (Chthonios), 303, 304, 307, 327, 366, 367, 120 *; as infant, 44; staff of, 112–113
 Hermippos, 168
 Herodotos, 43, 72, 73, 164–165, 167, 188, 218^{87 88}, 224¹⁰², 238¹⁵⁷, 257, 268²³⁹, 270²⁴⁷, 274⁴, 317¹³⁷
heros, 353, 354, 360, 370, 380
 Herrmann, A., 57²¹
 Herter, H., 311¹²³, 325¹⁶², 341²¹³

- Hesiod, 65, 74, 109⁵⁰⁶, 111²¹⁸, 165⁹⁰, 186^{174 175}, 300⁸⁵, 303⁹², 319¹⁴⁹, 335, 359²³⁷
- Hesychios, xxxiv¹², 42, 43, 78, 82¹⁰¹, 86¹²¹, 99¹⁰⁵, 104¹⁸⁸, 145³⁰, 153⁶⁸, 185¹⁷², 203⁴⁰, 245¹⁷¹, 264²¹⁹, 286⁴⁰, 298⁷⁶
- hetaira, 281, 312, 76B^{*}, 76C^{*}
- Hieronymus, 143³²
- hierophantes, 353
- Hieros gamos, 300
- Hiller von Gaertringen, F., 39¹¹, 202⁸⁵, 353²²⁴
- Himerios, 110, 113, 205⁴³, 251
- Himmelmann-Wildschütz, N., 314¹³¹, 379³⁰²
- Hipparchos, 29²
- Hippokrates, 37
- Hipponax, 65⁸⁸
- Hipta, 260, 274–275
- Hirmer, M., 12¹², 53⁷, 56¹⁵, 72⁶², 87¹²⁵, 280²⁰
- Hittites, 255, 256, 257¹⁰⁸, 261; weather god, story of, 46–47, 49
- Höfer, O., 88¹²⁸, 161⁸⁸
- Hofmannsthal, H. von, 343; quoted, 330–331
- Holland, L. B., 223⁹⁹, 228¹²⁰, 229¹²⁵
- holmos, 229¹²⁴, 232
- “holy open secret,” 225, 226
- Homer, xxxiii, xxxiv, 54, 55, 65, 67, 73, 99, 100, 106, 109, 174, 214, 251, 257; Iliad, xxiii^{9 7 8}, xxxiv¹⁰, 34, 42⁵⁶, 54⁹, 55^{13 14}, 65³⁷, 74^{68 69}, 98, 105¹⁸³, 131^{3 5}, 174¹³⁰, 176, 177, 178¹⁴⁵, 179¹⁵¹, 192¹¹, 208⁵², 212⁶⁷, 240¹⁵⁶, 275¹², 328¹⁷⁶; Odyssey, xxxiii⁷, 15–16, 18, 25, 37, 41⁶⁰, 54⁹, 57²², 65, 70⁵⁶, 98, 101, 103, 214⁷², 239, 263²¹⁶
- Homeric Hymns, 152, 181, 198²⁸, 277¹⁹, 360²⁴³; to Apollo, 45⁶⁸, 50, 207⁴⁸, 208⁵³, 210, 212; to Demeter, 112, 149; to Dionysos, 88–89, 167; to Hermes, 44, 49
- honey, 31, 34–35, 36, 38, 42, 44, 48, 50, 52, 118, 225; Dionysos and, 31, 49; mead from, 35–38, 43, 49–50, 90, 98; thieves, 30–31, 33, 44, 16^{*}
- Hooke, S. H., 255¹⁹²
- Hoorn, G. van, 289⁴⁰, 292⁵⁸, 306¹⁰⁷, 307¹¹¹, 318¹⁴³, 363²⁵⁴, 364²⁵⁷, 372²⁸⁰
- Hopfner, T., 248¹⁷⁵, 284⁸⁷, 294⁹⁸
- Horace: *Carmina (Odes)*, 219, 377²⁹⁷; *Epistolae*, 327¹⁰⁷, 328¹⁷⁵
- Horai, 163, 250, 286; Dionysos with, 144, 37^{*}
- horned child, 114, 115, 245, 270
- horned Dionysos, 362, 114^{*}
- Horus, 294
- Hosioi (holy men), 49, 223, 229, 235–236
- hosion (commandment), 30, 31, 33, 44
- hosioter (sacrifice), 236
- humanism, 348
- human race, creation of, 242
- Humboldt, W. von, xxxi¹
- hunters/hunting: animals caught alive, 82–89; Dionysos, 87, 88–89, 26^{*}; Orestheus, 75–76; Zagreus, 80–89
- hunting boots, 55, 88, 190, 270, 313, 379, 380
- Huxley, A., 139
- Hydra, 180
- hydromeli, 36, 37
- Hyginus, 76⁷⁷, 106¹⁹⁷, 109²⁰⁹, 110²¹⁰, 120²³⁵, 154^{70 72}, 155⁷³, 157⁷⁸, 185¹⁷⁶, 230¹³⁰, 259²⁰⁶, 314¹³³, 324¹⁵⁸
- hymnodidaskaloi, 351
- Hyperboreans, land of, 205⁴⁸, 206, 209, 217
- Hyria, 42–43
- Hyrieus, 42
- hysteria, collective, 138–139
- I
- Iachen/Iachim, 77
- iachron, 78
- Iakar, 73, 77
- Iakchos/Iakos/Iachos, 73, 77, 78–79, 279, 280
- Iasion/Iasios, 83
- ichor, 34
- Ida, Mt., 275
- Idaeon Cave, 33, 84, 86, 266
- Ikarion (deme), 148, 149, 152, 155, 160, 172, 296, 307; idols of Dionysos in, 282–283, 322–323, 328, 79^{*}, 80^{*}, 81^{*}; tragedy originated in, 322, 323, 324, 326
- Ikarios, 149, 151–156, 162, 163, 164, 323; Dionysos visits, 148, 171, 41^{*}, 60^{*}

- Ikaros/Ikaria (island), 151, 152, 153
Iliad, *see* Homer
Illuyankas, 46–47
Inachos River, 180, 181, 184
Inatos, cave sanctuary, 19
incest in birth of Dionysos, 110–114
Indians, American, visions, 15, 26
initiation: of boys, 268–269, 358, 359, 373–377; of child Dionysos, 374–376, 132A*–132C*; in Dionysian mysteries, 358–361, 373–377; enthronement as, 263, 264; of girls, 377; murder simulated in, 267; whitened faces in, 268
Ino, 246, 248
Ion (poet), 108²⁰⁴
Ionia, 298
Iphigeneia, 155
Isis, 154, 247, 282, 284, 310–311
Isler, H. P., 161⁸⁸
Isodaites (epithet), 231
Isola Sacra, murals, 375–376, 132A*–132C*
Israelites, 255
Italy, Dionysian religion in, 360, 362, 363, 371, 385–388; *see also* Bacchanalia; mysteries of Dionysos
ivy, 61–64, 187, 196, 305
- J
- Jacoby, F., 45⁷⁸, 49⁸¹, 75⁷⁵, 102^{176 178}, 123²⁴⁵, 143⁸², 180¹⁵², 185¹⁷¹, 192¹¹, 195²⁰, 232¹⁸⁸, 291⁵¹, 317¹⁸⁸
Jacolliot, L., 227¹¹⁷
Jeanmaire, H., 85^{118 119}, 138²¹
Jensen, A. E., 270²⁴⁰
Jesus Christ as true vine, 257–258
Johansen, K. F., 305^{101 102}, 314¹³⁰
Julius Caesar, 363
Jullien, A., 298⁷⁷
Jung, C. G., 208⁵⁴, 262²¹⁴
Jupiter Dolichenus, 256
Juvenal, 369²⁷¹
- K
- Kabeiroi, 195²⁰, 269, 276
Kadmos, 143; daughters of, 185; palace of (Kadmeia), 194–197
Kadmos/Kadmeios (epithet), 195
Kähler, H., xxiv³
Kakoure, K. I., 23³⁵
Kallimachos, 32, 44, 83¹¹⁰, 140, 216⁸², 232¹³⁵
Kallixenos of Rhodes, 60²⁰¹, 66⁴¹, 378²⁰⁸
kanephoros, 173
kantharos, 327, 376–377, 380
Karouzou, S., 66³⁹, 170¹¹⁵
Kasion, Mt., 46, 47
Kastalia spring, 207
Kastor of Rhodes, 143³²
Kathegemon (epithet), 351
Kato Zakros, 53⁶⁷, 56
Kees, H., 77⁸⁴
Keil, J., 295⁶⁸
Kekrops painter, 297
Keller, G. A., 153⁶⁷
Kenna, V. E. G., 22³⁰, 81⁹⁸
Keos, 39, 77, 191–192
Kephaisodotos, 195
Keramopoulos, A. D., 194¹⁴, 196²¹
Keres, 304, 304⁶⁰
Kern, O., 35²⁸, 36³⁰, 111²¹⁵, 112²²⁰, 231¹³⁴, 242^{102 103}, 244¹⁰⁰, 248¹⁷⁶, 249¹⁷⁹, 251¹⁸⁴, 253¹⁸³, 259^{200 200}, 260^{207 208}, 261²¹⁰, 264²²¹, 269²⁴⁴, 270²⁴⁹, 274⁷, 275⁸
kid, *see* goat
Killen, J. T., 71⁵⁷
Kinkel, G., 83¹⁰⁷
Kissos (Dionysos), 63, 196
Kithairon, Mt., 179^{149 150}, 192
Klauser, T., 263²¹⁵
Klea, 222–223, 226
Kleidemos, 102
Klitias and Ergotimos, Krater of, 144, 37*
Klytaimnestra, 155
Knackfuss, H., 91¹³⁷
Knossion (pattern), 96–98, 34*
Knossos, 5, 8, 53, 54, 72⁸¹, 193, 212; coins, 96–97, 104–106; frescoes, 12¹², 62, 94, 101⁷³, 2*, 32A*, 32B*; labyrinth, *see* labyrinth; mysteries, 79, 118; palace, 17, 263; tablets, 69, 71, 77⁸¹, 89, 98, 100, 212⁶⁷
koinonia, 310
komodia, 333, 334
komos, 72, 333–337, 339–340, 341, 104*, 105*; children's, 363²⁵³, 115*

- Kondoleon, A. E., 237¹⁵⁵
 Kontoleon, N. M., 81⁹⁷
 Kore, 116
 Korgos, 46
 Korkyne, 122²¹³
 Koronis, 103, 104, 106–108, 120
 Körte, A., 348²⁰⁹
 Korybantes, 264, 267, 269
Korykion antron (cave), 48, 49, 210, 223–224, 255, 261
 Korykos (localities), 43, 45–46
korykos, 43, 45, 225; *see also* sack, leather
 Koukoules, P., 67^{46 47}
 Kouretes, 264, 265, 266, 269
 Kourouniotes, K., 278²¹
 Kouros, 266
 Kradaios Dionysos, 260, 274
 Krates, 332; *Animals*, quoted, 342
 Kratinos, 351
 Kretschmer, P., 32¹³, 107²⁰³
 Kritikos, P. G., 24⁸⁷
 Kronos, 35, 113, 242, 266, 275, 387; castration of, 36
krotaloi, 367
 Krueger, A., 241¹⁰¹, 243¹⁰⁵
 Kühn, C. G., 52¹, 60²⁷
 Kunze, E., 84¹¹²
 Kybele, 150, 264
 Kydonia, 45; seal from, 81, 25^{*}
kykeon, 24, 53
 Kyllenian grotto, 44
 Kynaithai, 54
- L
- labyrinth, 90–107, 110, 117–118, 28^{*–35*}; dance in, 94, 97–101, 107, 118; mistress of, 90, 95, 98–99, 101, 102, 105, 106, 107, 118
 Lacroix, L., 191⁵
 Lambert, W. G., 193¹³
 Landau, O., 71^{58 60}
 Lang, M., 97¹⁶³
 Langlotz, E., 81⁹⁰, 92^{141 142}, 171¹²⁰, 368²⁰⁷
 Latte, K., 104¹⁸³
 Lawrence, D. H., 61³⁰
 Lawson, J. C., 148⁵⁰
 Learchos, 246, 248
 leather sack, *see* sack, leather
 Lehmann, K., 264²²², 381³⁰⁰, 382^{310–313}, 383³¹⁵
 Leipoldt, J., 140²⁶
 Leitch, J., 27⁴⁵
 Lenai (bacchantes), 296, 298, 340
 Lenaia, 199, 279, 283–284, 296–300, 316, 317, 327; drama in, 335, 336, 338, 343, 349
 Lenaion (month), 298, 299
lenos, 65, 66, 298, 299, 384
 Lenschau, T., 144³⁰
 Leonidas of Tarentum, 249
 Lepsius, K. R., 167¹⁰⁷
 Lerat, L., 207⁴⁹
 Lerna, 174, 178, 183, 201, 207, 292, 293, 311; lake of, 179–181
 Lesbos, 286, 353
 Lesky, A., 240¹⁵⁸, 326^{165 166}
 Leto, 209, 211, 214
 Levi, D., 6², 20²⁷, 51⁸⁶, 53⁷, 119²³¹
 Lewis, D. M., 148⁴⁹
 Lhote, H., 57
 Liber Pater, 375, 376
 Liddell, H. G., 34²⁴
 life: after death, 349, 364–373, 118^{*–131B*}; and death in Dionysian religion, 52, 179–181, 183, 192, 197, 200, 204–205, 261, 317; indestructibility of, 115, 200, 241, 373, 387; *zoë* and *bios* distinguished, xxviii, xxxi–xxxvii
 light: Apollo as god of, 209, 233; and birth of Zeus, 30–35; Dionysos associated with, 74–75, 77–78, 279; festival of, 118; and new year, 43; of Zeus, 32, 75, 78
 Liknites (Dionysos), 44, 49, 215⁷⁷, 218; awakening of, 222–226, 235, 260, 272, 288, 310
liknon (winnowing basket), 44–45, 218, 222, 223, 225, 379, 387; child in, 272, 274, 71^{*}; mask in, 289, 89^{*}; in mysteries, 354, 359, 361²¹⁴, 376, 377; phallus in, 260, 273, 276, 288, 359, 377, 72^{*}
 Lindemann, F. O., xxxii²
linos song, 65
 lion, 84
 Lipari, 252
 Livy, 45⁶⁸, 355

Lobeck, C. A., 268²⁴¹
Lobel, E., 84¹¹⁵, 187¹⁸⁰, 205⁴³
Locrians, Ozolian, 76
Lokroi, 367
"lord of the wild beasts," 81–82, 84, 203, 25^{*}
Lorimer, H. L., 174¹³⁰
Lucan, 219–220
Lucian, 78, 106¹⁹⁷, 161⁹⁰, 164⁹⁷, 340²⁰⁰
Luschey, H., 283³²
Lycia, 209
Lydia, 275
Lykaion, Mt., 32
Lykophron, 181¹⁵⁰, 195²⁰, 224¹⁰⁸, 236, 261²⁰⁰, 286⁴⁰
Lykourgos, 176–178, 219, 233, 329

M

Maass, E., 153⁹⁷, 154⁷¹
Macrinus, Marcus Pompeius (Theophanes), 353
Macrobius, 233¹⁴¹, 237, 303⁹³, 325¹⁰¹
Macurdy, G. M., 310¹²¹
madness, 131–134, 163, 165, 176, 179, 186, 188
maenads, 31, 52, 78, 88–89, 176, 179, 197, 202–203, 217, 227, 231, 254, 266, 271–272, 281, 17^{*}, 64c^{*}, 68^{*}–71^{*}; in heavenly marriage after death, 370; maenadism, 138–139, 176, 189; on mules, 169, 52b^{*}, 53^{*}; in mysteries, 359, 362, 110b^{*}, 110d^{*}, 110e^{*}, 112c^{*}, 112d^{*}; as nurses of Dionysos, 379, 138^{*}; on Parnassos (Thyiades), 218–224, 235, 237; snakes used by, 60–61, 64, 22a^{*}, 22b^{*}; Thracian bachelantes, 219–220, 233, 329
Magna Graecia, *see* Italy
Magnes, 341
Mago, 40
Maimakterion (month), 295, 296
Maimonides, Moses, 255¹⁰²
Maira (dog), 153, 154, 171–172
Maiuri, A., 265²²⁹, 362²⁵¹, 383³¹⁴
mankind, creation of, 242
Mari, 159
Marinatos, S., 12¹², 18³², 30⁵, 53⁷, 56¹⁵, 72⁶², 87¹²⁵, 208⁵¹
Marmor Parium, 320¹⁵¹, 323¹⁵⁵
marriage: in Dionysian mysteries, 355, 357–358, 360–362, 110c^{*}, 112f^{*}, 114^{*}; of Dionysos and Ariadne, 109–110, 114, 121–123, 384; of Dionysos and queen of Athens, 293, 300, 301, 307–312; heavenly, after death, 366–373; of Poseidon and Amphitrite, 9; significance of, *symmexis* and *gamos*, 309–310, 311; of Zeus and Hera, 300
Marzano, G., 365²⁹⁰
masks, 80, 166, 24^{*}; of actors, 327, 332; of Dionysos, 123, 192, 281–284, 76a^{*}–79^{*}, 82a^{*}–85^{*}; of grape treaders, 67; in Great Dionysia, 317; in *liknon*, 289, 89^{*}; in mysteries, 359
matrona, *see* *domina*
Matton, R., 62³³
Matz, F., 14¹⁰, 18²³, 116²²⁷, 350²¹⁴, 360²⁴², 363²⁵³, 373²⁸², 376²⁹¹ 292^{*}, 377²⁹⁴ 295^{*}, 379³⁰³ 304^{*}, 380³⁰⁰, 383³¹⁷, 384³¹⁸ 319^{*}
mead, 35–38, 43, 49–50, 52
meander (pattern), 90–92, 94–96, 104
meat, boiling and roasting, 246–247, 250, 252–256
Megapenthes, 70, 72, 185
Meidias painter, 307–308, 368
Meilichios (epithet), 123
Meineke, A., 149⁵¹
meixis, 310
Melampous, 72, 164–165, 167, 187, 239, 240, 285
Melanaigis (epithet), 163, 319
Melikertes, 246
melikratos, 37
Mellen, C., 26⁴⁴
Melpomenos, 161⁸⁸
men: in Choës Day celebration, 312–315; in choruses, 325, 339–341; in Dionysian mysteries, 353–355; in Dionysian religion, 164, 202–203, 226, 235–237, 240, 297, 307, 309, 350; in Great Dionysia, 317; heavenly marriage after death, 370; holy, *see* Hosioi; in *komos*, 333–336, 339–340; in women's parts on stage, 340–341, 104^{*}, 105^{*}
Menander, 300⁸¹, 348; *The Arbitration*, 348, quoted, 343–347
Menelaos, 70⁵⁴

Merkelbach, R., 154
 mescaline, 26
 Mette, H. J., 181¹⁵⁵, 233¹⁴⁰, 329¹⁷⁷
 Meuli, K., 254¹⁹¹
 Meyer, E., 29¹
 Milani, L. A., 159⁸⁴
 Milchhofer, A., 149⁵³, 150⁵⁵
 milk, kid boiled in, 252–256
 Millingen, J., 366²⁸³
 Minoan culture, *see under* Cretan-Minoan
 Minos, 41, 82, 98, 102, 109, 263
 Minotaur, 86, 91, 104, 105, 109, 117–120; in labyrinth, 91, 94, 99, 28*, 31*
 Minyas, daughters of, 179, 184, 185, 186, 188¹⁸³, 192
 mirror, 365, 366, 367; of child Dionysos, 265, 267, 269, 271; in initiation, 359
 Mitrephoros (epithet), 280, 314
mitrephoros, 367
 Mittelhaus, K., 173¹²⁵
 Mnaseas, 196^{23 24}
 Moirai, 387
 Mommsen, A., 298⁷⁷
 moon: Ariadne associated with, 104, 105–106, 116, 124; Erigone associated with, 155
 moon goddess: Artemis, 155; Hera, 184
 Moortgat, A., 257²⁰⁰
 Morgan Cup, 377²⁹⁷
 Mother Goddess, *see* Great Mother
 mountains, shrines on, 7, 13, 16, 19–20, 1*, 7*, 8*
 mules, 169–170, 290, 52A*–55*
 Müller, C. F. W., 138¹⁹, 231¹⁸¹
 Müller, K. O., 27, 28, 129, 174¹⁰, 268²⁴⁰
 Müller, W., 15
mundus patet, 300, 306, 315, 316, 317
 Murray, G., 203⁸⁸
 Muses, 178, 179
 Mycenaean culture, 11, 138, 184, 187, 191, 194, 195, 198, 269
 mysteries, Dionysian, 350–363, 381–383; Dionysos impersonated in, 354–355, 357, 360–362; initiation, 358–361, 373–377; Villa dei Misteri murals, 352, 355–363, 371, 374, 376, 379, 383, 386, 106*–112F*, 143*
mysterion, 309, 310
Mythographia Vaticani, 76⁷⁸, 116²²⁸, 245¹⁷¹

N

Naples, 364
 Nauck, A., 83¹⁰⁸, 84¹¹⁶, 86¹²¹, 218⁸⁰, 233¹⁴⁰, 328¹⁷⁰
 Naxos, 120–123, 151, 152; Dionysos in, 382, 141*; festivals of Ariadne, 192
 Neoplatonism, 241, 242
 Neos Theophanes, 353
 Neraides, 237
 Nestor, palace of, 69
 net, animals caught in, 87–88
 New Testament: John, xxv¹⁸, 257²⁰³, 258; Luke, xxv¹⁸; Mark, xxv¹⁸, 257²⁰²; Matthew, xxv¹⁸
 Newton, C. T., 191⁵
 New Year's festival, 41, 43, 50
 Nicander, 42⁵⁶
 Nietzsche, F. W., xxiii–xxv, 129, 132, 134–138, 324, 329
 Nikias of Elea, 264
 Nikomachos, 124²⁴⁰
 Nikosthenes, 42
 Nile, 167, 184; rising of, 29, 73
 Nilsson, M. P., xxvii, 30⁶, 60²⁷, 118²⁸¹, 138²⁰, 159⁸⁶, 169¹¹³, 203⁸⁰, 261²¹¹, 285^{88 80}, 295⁸⁸, 340²⁰², 350²¹⁴, 354^{225 227}, 373²⁸²
 Nilus, 85¹¹⁵
 Nogara, B., 254¹⁸⁸
 Nonnos, 57, 60²⁵, 114, 245, 265, 267, 270, 381; myth of grapevine, quoted, 58–60
 Norden, E., 215⁷⁷, 295⁷⁰, 299⁸⁰
 Norvin, W., 242¹⁸²
 numbers: three, 37; four, 40; seven, 106¹⁹⁷, 261
 nurses of Dionysos, 120–121, 178, 179, 246, 265, 270, 276, 284, 288, 289, 291, 378–379, 332
 Nyktelios (epithet), 231
 nymphs, 199, 210, 246, 291

O

Oates, W. J., 337¹⁸⁵, 339¹⁹⁷, 348²¹⁰
 Odyssey, *see* Homer
 Oellacher, H., 199⁸⁰
 Ohlemutz, E., 352^{220 222}
 Oikonomos, G. P., 147⁴⁵

- Oineus, 75, 76, 314
Oinoe (place), 213
Oinoia (place), 69
Oinoë (place), 152
Oinopion, 76–77
Oinops (epithet), 54, 63
Oinos (epithet), 270, 271
Old Testament: Deuteronomy, 255¹⁰²; Exodus, 255¹⁰²; Isaiah, 67, 140; Jeremiah, 257–258; Psalms, 257²⁰²
Olsen, E. C., 381³⁰⁰, 382^{310–313}, 383³¹⁵
Olympia, 30, 181, 184
Olympias, 60
Olympic Games, 37
Olympiodoros, 212⁸⁵, 242
Olympos, Mt., 267, 270
Omadios (epithet), 84, 203
Omestes (epithet), 84, 203
Onasimedes, 195
O'Neill, E., Jr., 337¹⁰⁵, 339¹⁰⁷, 348²¹⁰
Onomakritos, 231, 238, 240–245, 247, 261, 262, 263, 268, 269, 278, 326, 350, 374
opium, 24–27
opora, 73, 74
oracle at Delphi, *see* Delphi, oracle
Oracula Sibyllina, 263²¹⁵
Orchomenos, 179^{148 149}, 192
Orestheus, 75, 76
Origen, 373²⁸²
Orion, 76–77, 82, 87, 88, 103; birth of, 41–43, 76; constellation, 73–74; scorpion associated with, 42, 18^{*}; Sirius his dog, 41, 73–74, 75
Orista, 76²⁰
Orpheus, 239, 262, 264; killed by baccantes, 233, 267, 329
Orphic Hymns, 198, 202³⁰, 243, 277, 351; to Amphietes, 198, 199, 200³²; to Hipta, 275; to Perikionios, 196; to the Titans, 268
Orphic literature, 110, 239–245, 249, 260, 269, 274–275
Orphic religion, 35–36, 93¹⁴⁸, 110–112, 118, 231, 256, 259, 261, 276, 277–278, 364, 373, 374; Dionysian religion and, 240–245, 262–272; gold leaves used in, 252–253
Ortega y Gasset, J., 331; quoted, 315
Orthos (Dionysos), 144, 163, 286
Oschophoria, 102, 144–146, 162
Osiris, 154, 247, 247¹⁷⁵, 274, 282, 284, 293, 294, 310–311; mysteries of, 223, 226
Otto, E., 247¹⁷⁵
Otto, W. F., xxv, xxvi, xxviii, 55¹³, 64³⁰, 85, 89¹³³, 103¹⁸¹, 106¹⁰⁵, 107²⁰¹, 120²⁸⁸, 131–134, 138, 139, 176¹³⁸, 190^{3 4}, 204⁴², 206³⁷; quoted, 63–64, 131–134
Ouranos, 242
Ovid: *Fasti*, 31⁹, 35²⁷, 36, 40⁴⁰, 42⁵⁰, 355²⁸⁰; *Metamorphoses*, 106¹⁰⁷, 111, 158, 177¹⁴⁰, 179¹⁴⁰, 243¹⁰⁵, 245¹⁷¹

P
paean/*paian* (song), 79, 212, 214–217, 233
Pagasai, 192
Page, D., 84¹¹⁵, 187¹⁸⁰, 205⁴⁸
Paian/Paieon (god), 212, 215
Pallas Athena, *see* Athena
Palmer, L. R., 208⁵⁵, 257¹⁹⁸, 303⁹⁰
Palmer, R. B., xxv⁴
Pan, 266
Panathenaia, 167
Panegyreis, 197
Pangaion mountains, 219
Panofsky, E., 158⁸³
Panopeus, 103, 213–214
panthers, 266, 271, 376, 377, 66D^{*}, 70^{*}
Papadaki, S. P., 24⁸⁷
Papadimitriou, I., 151⁵⁸
Paribeni, R., 159⁸⁵
Parmenides, 94
Parnassos, Mt., 44, 208, 210–214, 217, 231, 235; secret ceremonies on, 236–237; Thyiades on, 218–224, 235, 237
parousia, 202, 278, 310, 317
Parrot, A., 160⁸⁸
Pasiphaë, 86, 116, 117
Patara, 209
pateterion, 65, 66
Patitucci, S., 288⁴⁵
Pausanias, 32¹⁸, 49⁸¹, 54¹⁰, 63³⁴, 76⁷⁸, 103¹⁷⁰, 105¹⁹², 111²¹⁰, 113²²², 137¹⁶, 141⁸⁰, 143⁸³, 145⁴⁰, 150⁶⁴, 157⁷⁰, 161⁸⁸, 164⁸⁴, 165, 166, 174¹⁸⁰, 177¹⁴³, 178¹⁴⁴

- Pausanias (*cont.*)
 180¹⁵⁴, 181^{156 159}, 183¹⁶⁷, 184¹⁶⁹, 194, 195,
 196^{24 25}, 202⁸⁷, 207⁴⁸, 214, 224, 229¹²⁵,
 241, 268²³⁰, 311¹²², 327¹⁷¹
- Pearson, A. C., 94¹⁵⁰, 99¹⁶⁷
- Pegasos, 163–166
- Peisistratos, 164
- Pelekys (epithet), 192
- Pendlebury, J. D. S., 95¹⁵⁶
- Penelope painter, 157
- pentaeteris*, 37, 38, 151–152
- Pentelikon, Mt., 148
- Pertheus, 69–71, 89, 185, 193, 203, 210,
 217, 329
- Pergamon, 351–352
- Perikionis (epithet), 198
- Perinthos, 250–251, 351
- Persephone, 103, 104, 106, 116, 120, 124,
 199, 301, 387; Ariadne as, 107, 113,
 116; with dancers and flower, 13, 16,
 4*; in Eleusinian Mysteries, 278; moth-
 er of Dionysos, 83, 110–114, 248, 256,
 265, 279
- Perseus, 176, 177, 179, 180, 184
- Persius, 67
- peyote, 26
- Pfuhl, E., 172¹²²
- Phaidra, 102, 109
- Phaistos, 51, 53⁷
- Phaleron, 102, 144, 145, 162, 170
- Phales, 71
- phallophoriai/phallagogiai*, 71–73, 239,
 260, 285–288, 297, 335, 338, 354, 87A*,
 87B*
- phallus, 19, 71–73, 144, 195, 387; arti-
 ficial, 285, 339; in basket (*liknon*), 225,
 267, 276, 288, 359, 377; ithyphallic
 state, significance of, 273–274; in mys-
 teries, 354, 359; of Osiris, 247, 247¹⁷⁵;
 phallic element in comedy, 332, 336–
 339; on pillar, 371–373; in sacrifices,
 260–261; symbol of Dionysos, 163, 164,
 165, 181, 285–290, 311; uncovering of,
 273, 72*
- Phanodemos, 291, 292
- Phanokles, 291
- pharmaka*, 24, 25
- Pherakyles, 185¹⁷¹
- philanthropeia*, 348
- Philistines, 53
- Philo, 202⁹⁶
- Philochoros, 49⁸¹, 232, 250, 317¹⁵⁸
- Philodamos, 216–217
- Philodemos, 248¹⁷⁰
- Philostatos, 101¹⁷¹, 164⁹⁸, 168¹⁰⁹, 340²⁰¹
- Phoebe, 210
- Phoenicians, 255
- Phokians, 268
- Phorbas, 328
- Phormis, 332
- Photios, 145⁴¹, 147⁴², 300⁸⁴, 305⁸⁹
- Phrygia, 36, 275, 276
- Phrynichos, 94¹⁵¹, 305, 330
- Physios (Bysios, month), 217
- physis*, xxxii, 7
- Phytios, 75
- phytou bios*, xxxiii
- Picard, C., xxvi, 81⁹⁶, 88¹³⁰, 159⁸⁵, 171¹²¹,
 254¹⁸⁹, 280²⁵
- Pickard-Cambridge, A., 146⁴³, 164⁹⁵,
 284³⁴, 288⁴⁴, 290⁴⁹, 296⁷², 299⁷⁸, 319¹⁴⁸,
 333¹⁸³, 335^{189 190}, 339¹⁸⁶, 340^{190 200}, 341²⁰⁸
- pillar, *see* column
- Pindar, 49⁸⁴, 74, 106¹⁹⁶, 183¹⁶⁸, 211⁶²,
 216⁸², 306, 316¹³⁵
- Piraeus, 144
- pirates, Dionysos captured by, 152, 167
- Piskokephalo, 9
- Pithoigia, 302–303
- Platakis, E., 86¹²³
- Plato: *Euthydemus*, 92, 93¹⁴⁴, 264–265;
Laws, 74, 131, 269²⁴⁵; *Phaedo*, xxxiv,
 93, 242; *Symposium*, 289; *Timaeus*,
 xxxiv¹³
- Platon, N., 6, 7, 8, 12, 18²², 19²⁴, 20²⁶,
 53⁶⁷, 56¹⁶, 72⁶¹, 138¹⁸
- Plaumann, G., 295⁶⁸
- Pleiades, 84, 215⁷⁷
- Pliny the Elder, 36⁸⁴, 37, 38, 39⁴³, 43⁶⁷,
 50, 57²³, 65³⁸, 280²⁵, 299⁸¹
- Plotinos, xxxv
- Plouton/Pluto/Hades, 83, 113, 297; Di-
 onysos identified with, 239–240
- Plutarch, xxxv, 93, 181, 183, 214–215,
 218, 222–223, 228, 231, 234; *Alexan-
 der*, 60²⁸, 61⁸¹, 216⁸¹; *Consolatio ad
 uxorem*, 373²⁸²; *De cohibenda ira*, 84¹¹⁴;
De cupiditate divitiarum, 285; *De defec-*

- tu oraculorum*, 222⁹⁶, 227¹¹⁶, 234^{146 148};
De E apud Delphos, 215^{70 70}, 217⁸⁶,
 223¹⁰⁰, 226, 229¹²², 231¹³³; *De Iside et*
Osiride, xxxv¹⁷, 44⁸², 49⁸², 180¹⁵²,
 223^{108 99}, 231¹³³, 248¹⁷⁵, 282, 294⁶⁶; *De*
primo frigido, 220⁶³; *Moralia*, xxxiv¹⁴;
Mulierum virtutes, 220⁹²; *Quaestiones*
conviviales, 64³⁶, 122²⁴¹, 178¹⁴⁸, 179¹⁴⁸,
 234¹⁴⁷, 302⁸⁹, 330; *Quaestiones Graecae*,
 32¹⁷, 48⁷⁰, 55¹², 178^{148 147}, 182^{160 162},
 183¹⁶⁴, 206⁴⁶, 216⁸⁰, 217⁸⁵, 233¹⁴³,
 235¹⁵⁰, 236¹⁵¹; *Quaestiones Romanae*,
 62³², 187¹⁷⁸; *Solon*, 327¹⁰⁷; *Themistocles*,
 84¹¹⁴, 202³⁷; *Theseus*, 102^{174-176 178},
 106^{195 198}, 107¹⁹⁹, 108²⁰⁴, 122²⁴³, 123²⁴⁴,
 277¹⁷
 Pollux, 67⁴⁴, 174¹³¹, 229¹²⁴, 293⁶⁹, 319¹⁴⁹,
 325¹⁶³
 Polyanos, 268²⁹⁹
 Polydoros, 195
 Polymnos, 311
 Pompeii: graffito, 96; Villa dei Misteri,
 murals, 352, 355-63, 371, 374, 376,
 379, 383, 386, 106*^{-112F*}, 143*
 Pomponius Mela, 45⁷⁰, 46
 Pomtow, H., 206⁴⁶, 215⁷⁰
 poppy/poppy seed, 23-24
 poppy goddess, 23, 24, 15*
 Porphyry, 84¹¹⁵, 86¹²³, 202⁸⁷, 232¹⁸⁸, 266²⁸¹,
 Porto Raphti, 148-151
 Poseidon, xxxiii, 9, 41, 111, 122²⁴¹, 387;
 Dionysos and, 297, 90*
 Poseidon (month), 296
 Pottier, E., 61²⁹
 Poussin, N., 158⁸³
 Powell, J. U., 149⁸¹, 199⁸⁰, 214⁷⁵, 217⁸⁴,
 248¹⁷⁶, 268²³⁸, 301⁸⁷, 323¹⁵⁷
 Pozzo di Santulla, 46
 Prasiai, 149-152, 183-184
 Pratinas of Phleious, 324
pregma, 274, 309, 310, 352, 361, 373; *see*
also mysteries, Dionysian
 pregnancy, 358; interrupted, 295
 Preisendanz, K., 183¹⁶⁵
 Preller, L., 103¹⁸¹
 premature birth, 106, 108, 294-295
 Priene, 201
 Privitera, G. A., 240¹⁶⁸
 Probos, 76⁷⁶, 186¹⁷⁴
 processions of Dionysos, 166-175, 285-
 288, 296
 Proitos, daughters of, 165, 184-188
 Proklos, 93¹⁴⁴, 145⁴¹, 260²⁰⁸, 261²⁰⁰
 Prometheus, 142
 Propertius, 154⁷⁰
 Prosymnos, 311
 Protrepiticus, 277¹⁰
 Prott, H. von, 183¹⁶⁵
 Psellos, M., 230¹²⁹
 Pseudo-Demosthenes, 292⁵⁷, 293⁶¹, 302⁸⁸,
 308¹¹⁴, 309^{116 117}
psyche, xxxiv, 354
 Ptolemaios Philadelphos, 60²⁰, 66
 Ptolemy II, 378
 Puhvel, J., 69⁵¹, 165¹⁰¹
 Pylaochos, 180
 Pylos, xxvi, 23, 28, 71, 165, 188, 263;
 tablets, 68-69, 71⁶⁸, 77⁸¹, 82, 97, 98,
 137, 264, 303, 34*
 Pythagoras, 342
 Pythais (procession), 213, 236
 Pythia (prophetess), 49, 206, 210, 211,
 232, 234; duties of, 226-229
 Pythian games, 230
 Pytho (Delphi), 208
 Python, 48, 210, 211-212, 230-231
- Q
- Quandt, W., 84¹¹⁵, 196²⁴, 198^{28 29}, 199⁸¹,
 225¹⁰⁷, 243^{167 168}, 268²³⁸, 275⁹, 276¹⁵,
 277²⁰, 351^{215 216}, 352²²¹, 354²²⁰
 queen of Athens, 76, 160, 162, 169, 170,
 290, 352, 354, 355; marriage with Di-
 onysos, 293, 300, 301, 307-312, 361
- R
- Radin, M., 255¹⁹²
 Radke, G., 122²⁴⁰
 ram, 180, 379
 Ramsay, W. M., 255¹⁹²
 Ransome, H. M., 35²⁰
 Ras Shamra, 46, 255
 Rawson, M., 263²¹⁷
 Rehm, A., 90¹⁹⁶
 Reichhold, K., 144³⁴, 157⁸⁰
 Reinach, S., 247¹⁷⁸, 250¹⁸¹, 255¹⁹²

Reni, G., 158⁸³
rhamnus leaves, 305
Rhea, 8, 24, 30, 57–58, 59, 60, 111–112, 114, 116, 119, 124, 256, 264, 275; and birth of Zeus, 266; restores Dionysos to life, 248, 256
Rhodes, 201
Rhodope mountains, 219
rhyton/rhyta, 53, 54, 55, 60, 19*, 20*
Richter, G., 18²⁸
Rieu, E. V., 74⁸⁸
Rilke, R. M., 287
roasted meat, 246–247, 250
Robert, C., 153⁸⁷
Rodenwaldt, G., 66⁴⁰
Rohde, E., xxv, 137, 138, 158⁸⁰, 175, 176¹⁸⁵, 202⁹⁶, 305⁹⁹
Rohden, H. von, 254¹⁸⁰, 271²⁵², 272²⁵³, 273¹
Rome: Bacchanalia forbidden in, 355, 357, 363; Farnesina, ornament, 376, 133*; house of Pammachius, 122²⁴³
Ross, W. D., xxiii⁴, 308¹¹³
Rouse, W. H. D., 16¹⁸
Rumpf, A., 290⁴⁸

S

Sabazios, 60²⁸, 117, 275, 276; mysteries of, 288–289, 351, 363, 383, 88A*–88D*
sack, leather, 38, 40–41, 44–51, 211, 212, 225, 256¹⁸⁸, 277; in birth of Orion, 42–43, 76
sacrifice, 39, 120, 238–261; as atonement for sin, 320–321, 323; of bull, 173, 180, 182, 190, 203, 213, 236, 315–316, 318; of cattle, 40–41, 54, 55, 115–116, 190–191, 270; of child, 179, 189, 269–270, 379; Dionysos as victim, 203, 244–261; of enemy of Dionysos, 324–326, 329, 333; of goat or kid, 202³⁷, 203, 233–235, 249, 250, 252–256, 270, 318–324, 333, 351, 364, 76B*, 76C*, 103*; human, 202; in *Lenaiá*, 335; preparations for, 64A*–64D*; of ram, 180; secrecy in, 259–261
St. Martin's Day, 294
Salis, A. von, 357²⁸⁴, 361²⁴⁷, 362²⁵⁰
salpinx/salpinges, 173–174, 180, 312, 61B*; Dionysos called with, 201–202

Samos, 286
Samothrace, 264; mysteries, 118, 267, 269
sandal, one only, 360
Sannion, 71, 73
Sappho, 187
sarcophagi, Dionysian scenes on, 377–385, 137*–142*, 144*–145*
Saridakis, S., 201³⁴
satyr plays, 324–325, 330
satyrs, 271–272, 281, 285, 364–365, 375, 376, 379, 380, 384, 68*–71*, 116*, 117*; as grape treaders, 59–60, 66, 68*; men impersonating, 237, 325; in mysteries, 358, 359, 362
Savignoni, L., 80⁸⁴
Schaefer, J., 275¹⁰
Schefold, K., 366²⁶⁵
Schelling, F. W. J. von, 133, 134
Schneider, E., 26⁴¹
Schoene, A., 143⁸²
Schopenhauer, A., 137
Schott, S., 67⁴⁸
Schweitzer, B., 28, 177¹¹¹
Schwyzer, R., xxviii¹¹
Scorpio, 42
scorpion, 42, 82, 18*
Scott, R., 34²⁴
Segall, B., 81⁹⁹
Selloi, 208
Semachidai, 146, 149
Semachos, 161, 163; Dionysos visits, 146–149, 162, 39A*, 39B*
Semele, 196, 196²⁵, 248, 265, 277, 355, 386, 65A*, 65B*; bridal chamber (sanctuary) of, 194; mother of Dionysos, 55, 106–108, 110, 120, 161⁸⁸, 181, 184, 185, 256, 259, 279, 295, 306, 378; in mysteries, 360
Semites, 261, 270; Dionysian religion, 256–257
Semitic languages, 208, 211, 255
Semos, 287
Senyes, 77
Servius, 42⁵⁶, 76⁷⁶, 174¹²⁹, 185¹⁷¹, 209⁵⁶, 231¹³¹, 261¹⁸², 261²⁰⁹, 363²⁵⁵
sheep as prize, 318
ship (car) of Dionysos, 141, 144, 166–172, 309, 49*–52A*, 56A*, 56B*, 57*, 59A*, 59B*

- Sichtermann, H., 17²⁰, 369^{270 272}
Sicily, 332
sileni, 71, 147, 148, 158, 162, 169, 266, 285, 367–370, 375, 376, 378, 379; as grape treaders, 66, 67, 23^{*}; men impersonating, 171, 313, 314; in mysteries, 351, 358–359, 361, 362
Simon, E., 271²⁵², 272²⁵³, 288⁴⁵, 307¹¹⁰, 313¹²⁹, 377^{293 297}, 378^{298 300}, 379³⁰¹, 380
Simonides, 191–192
Sirius, 75, 172; dog of Orion, 41, 73–74, 75; in Ikarios myth, 153, 154; protective magic against, 77; rising of, 29, 30, 34, 37, 39, 40, 41, 43, 50, 73, 74, 77, 118, 206; year of, 38, 41, 78, 205
sistrum, 72
situla, 364, 368–370
Skopelos, 138
Smith, W. R., 257³⁰¹
Smyrna, 168, 295
snake/snakes, 21, 52; in birth of Dionysos, 111–114, 263; bull and, 117; in Dionysian rites, 60–62, 64, 383, 22A^{*}, 22B^{*}; Dionysos as, 123; as god, 113; grapevines associated with, 57, 58–60; ivy associated with, 61–62, 64; poisonous, 60–61; in Sabazios mysteries, 288–289; symbolism of, 114–115, 117, 119
snake goddess, 13, 16, 22, 52, 4^{*}, 13^{*}, 14^{*}
Sokolowski, F., 202³⁵
Sokrates, 92, 93, 264–265
Sokrates (historian), 180, 182¹⁰²
Solon, 317¹³⁷, 326–327, 348
Sophokles, 94, 99, 328; *Ajax*, 174¹³², *Antigone*, 78, 224¹⁰⁴, 349; *Oedipus at Colonus*, 63³⁵
Sosipolis, 113²²², 119
soul, the, Ariadne as archetype, 124–125
souls, wine for, 303–304, 91^{*}
Sousarion, 341
sparagmos (dismemberment), 245, 247
Spencer, B., 35²⁷
spiral pattern, 91, 92, 94–96, 99
Stackelberg, O. M. von, 161⁸⁰, 169¹¹³, 173¹²⁰
Staphylos, 76⁷⁸, 108, 138
stars, 105–106, 117–118
Staudacher, W., 47⁷⁷
Stella, L. A., 54⁸, 56¹⁷, 82¹⁰³
Stephen of Byzantium, 43⁵⁷, 122²⁴², 143⁸², 245¹⁷¹
Stimula, 355
Stobaeus, 93¹⁴⁵
Sto Dionysio, 148
Stolpe, S., 267²⁸⁵
Strabo, 35²⁷, 43⁵⁷, 45^{65 69 70}, 75⁷⁴, 275¹¹, 292
suffering god, 70–71, 116, 179, 190, 193, 213, 329
Suidae Lexicon, 77⁸³, 151⁶⁰, 163⁸⁸, 228¹²¹, 241¹⁰¹, 304⁶⁶, 308¹¹³, 317¹³⁷, 324¹⁰⁰, 326¹⁰⁶, 327¹⁰⁸, 328¹⁷⁶, 330¹⁷⁰
summer solstice, 29
Svoronos, J. N., 88¹³⁰, 97¹⁰⁰, 104^{186 188}, 105^{187–189 191}, 232¹³⁷
swaddling clothes of Zeus, 30, 44
swinging, 156–159, 160, 301, 307, 312, 42B^{*}, 43^{*}, 94^{*}, 95^{*}
Sybaris, 252
Sybil, 188¹⁸²
Sybilline oracle, 351
symmeixis, 309–310, 311, 355, 361
Syria, 46, 47, 50

T

- Tabulae Heracleenses*, 141⁸⁰
Tacitus, 67⁴⁷, 158⁸⁰
tainiai, 44, 365, 366
Tarquinius Priscus, 188¹⁸²
Tenedos, 54–55, 190, 191, 270
Teos, 45
thanatos, xxxiv, 132
theaters, 296; *see also* comedy; drama; tragedy
Thebes, 179¹⁴⁶, 184, 185, 188, 213; Dionysian cult, 192–197, 278, 329; Dionysos born in, 143; Kadmeia (palace), 194–197
Themis, 210, 211, 211⁶²
Themistios, 326¹⁰⁵
Theodoros of Kolophon, 158⁸²
Theogamia, 300
Theokritos, 23, 374²⁸³
Theopompos, 181, 192¹¹
Theoxenios (month), 206, 217

- Theseus, 94, 145; Ariadne and, 98, 101–103, 107, 108, 109, 120, 123; in labyrinth, 91, 98–99, 28 *, 29 *
- Thesiger, E., 85 ¹¹⁸
- Thespis, 317 ¹³⁷, 320, 322, 326–330; plays of, 328–329
- Thesprotian oracle, 230
- Thetis, 178, 179
- thiasos*, 123, 313, 319, 368; in mysteries, 353, 354, 356, 359, 361, 362
- Thiele, G., 88 ¹²⁸
- Thimme, J., 370 ²⁷⁴ ²⁷⁵
- Thomson, G., 37 ⁴⁰
- Thorikos, 149
- Thrace, 137–138, 176; bacchantes (*maenads*), 219–220, 233, 329; mysteries, 118; Shrovetide play, 295
- Thukydides, 292, 302, 316 ¹³⁶
- thunderstone, 86
- Thurii, krater from, 362, 363, 114 *
- thyein* (raving), 182, 183, 189, 220
- Thyia, 183, 184 ¹⁶⁸, 190
- Thyiades, 49, 69, 212, 213, 214, 217, 222, 223, 227, 228, 231, 236, 298; on Parnassos, 218–224, 235, 237
- thyiadic state, 189–190, 217, 222
- thymaterion*, 173
- Thyone, 360
- thyrsos*, 180, 200, 201, 218, 280, 313, 359, 367, 369, 370, 379, 380, 386, 387
- Tillyard, E. M. W., 362 ²⁴⁹
- Timarchos, 195
- Titans, 110–111; Dionysos killed by, 231, 240–246, 259, 267–268; killed by Zeus, 242–245; mankind descended from, 242; white faces of, 267–268
- Tityos, 214
- Tmolos, Mt., 275
- Tod, M. N., 327 ¹⁷²
- Toepffer, J., 100 ¹⁶⁸
- Tolles, R., 348 ²¹¹
- torchbearers/torchlight, 78, 215, 218, 222
- Touloupa, E., 193 ¹³, 194 ¹⁴
- tragedy/tragedies, 163, 166, 331, 333, 349; beginnings of, 315–330
- Traglatella, wine pitcher, 97
- tragodia*, 334; meaning of, 318, 333
- transmigration of souls, 243 ¹⁰⁷
- trees, bending, 237
- Trendall, A. D., 75 ⁷³, 86 ¹³⁰, 280 ²⁴, 373 ²⁸¹
- Trieterikos, 198, 213
- trieteris* (year of Dionysos, two-year period), 141–142, 192, 197, 205, 213, 214–215, 217, 218, 222, 231, 235, 238, 249, 283, 323; dialectic of, 198–204
- Trigonos (epithet), 277
- tripod: at Delphi, *see* Delphi, tripod; as prize, 320
- Troglodytes, 35 ²⁷
- tropeion*, 65, 66
- Troy, J.-F. de, 158 ⁸³
- trygodia*, 334
- tuba*, Roman, 174
- Turcan, R., 383 ³¹⁶
- Tyche, 387
- tympanon*, 368, 369, 370
- Typhon, 46, 47–48
- Tzetzes, J., 286 ⁴⁰
- U
- Ugarit, 46, 255, 261
- underworld, 118, 236 ¹⁵¹; Ariadne in, 107, 108; Dionysos in, 180–182, 199–200, 256, 292, 303, 304, 311; Journey to, 93, 181, 239, 318; oracle connected with, 230, 232
- unlucky days, 216
- Usener, H., 168 ¹¹⁰, 235 ¹⁵⁰, 294 ⁶³
- V
- Varro, Marcus Terentius, 39–40, 174 ¹²⁹, 249, 303 ⁹³
- Vathypetro, 56
- Ventris, M., xxvi, 23 ³³, 53 ², 54 ⁸, 56 ¹⁸, 71, 100 ¹⁶⁶, 264 ²²⁰
- Vermeule, C. C., 150 ⁶⁶
- Virgil: *Aeneid*, 42 ⁵⁶, 209 ⁵⁶, 231 ¹³¹ ¹³², 261 ²⁰⁹; *Eclogues*, 185 ¹⁷¹, 186 ¹⁷⁴, 295 ⁷⁰, 363 ²⁵⁵; *Georgics*, 40 ⁴⁷, 76 ⁷⁸, 322 ¹⁵⁴
- visions, 14–20, 52; gestures and, 20–22, 9 *–13 *; opium and, 24–27
- vita*, xxxi
- viticulture, 50, 51, 55–58; myth of origin, 58–60
- Vogliano, A., 352 ²²³, 353 ²²⁴

W

- Wace, A. J. B., 327¹⁷²
 Wagenvoort, H., 157⁷⁷
 Wagner, R., 135, 137
 Watzinger, C., 254¹⁸⁰
 weather god, Hittite, 46–47
 Webster, T. B. L., 80⁹⁶
 Weinreich, O., 335¹⁸⁷
 Welcker, F. G., 191
 Welter, G., 122²⁴¹
 Weniger, L., 30³, 139³⁴, 181¹⁰⁹, 268^{280 241}
 Westermann, A., 45⁶³
 Whitman, Walt, 286–287
 Whitman, William, 15¹⁷
 Wiedmann, A., 72⁶³
 Wiegand, T., 91
 Wiesner, J., 9⁶
 Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, U. von, 137, 218⁸⁷, 281¹⁸², 375²⁹⁶
 wild strawberry tree, 327
 Wilhelm, A., 310^{119 120}
 Willemsen, F., 228^{118 119}, 233¹³⁰
 wine: Christian significance of, 258; Dionysos as god of, xxiv–xxv, 35, 52, 55, 76, 142–146, 249, 270; Ikarios as discoverer of, 152–156, 323; lees of, for painting faces, 327, 334, 336; mead related to, 36–37, 50; in Minoan culture, 53–58; myths of origin, 58–60, 75–77; new wine festival, 291–294, 296, 297, 302⁵⁰; water transformed into, 299
 wine-making, 65–68; Dionysos teaches, 142–143, 152; invention of, 57–60
 wine press, 66–67
 wineskin, jumping on, 312, 324
 Winnefeld, H., 254¹⁸⁹, 271²⁵², 272²⁵³, 273¹
 winnowing basket, see *liknon*
 winter, Dionysian festivals and rites, 217–222, 290–291, 296–300
 winter solstice, 299
 Wissowa, G., 188¹⁸², 302⁵⁰
 Witte, J. J., 284³⁰
 Wolters, P., 91, 92^{141 142}
 women: in Choë's Day celebration, 312–315; at Delphi in Dionysian rites, 213, 214, 217–219; in Dionysian religion, 52, 55, 69, 121, 130–133, 145, 146, 160–162, 176–179, 187, 190, 191, 200–203, 288–290, 293, 296, 298, 317, 348; forbidden to approach tripod, 226, 228, 235; heavenly marriage after death, 366–370; in labor, youths imitating, 277; in mysteries, 352–355, 357–363; as nurses of Dionysos, 178, 179, 276, 284, 288, 289; in Orphism, 262; sacrificial ceremonies, 244, 246, 258–259, 261; secret rituals, 189–190, 192–193, 197, 214, 235, 240, 241, 261, 288–289, 302, 350; on stage, 340; see also maenads; Thyiades
 women's clothes, boys or men in, 145, 145⁴¹, 150, 170, 335; men in, on stage, 340–341, 104^{*}, 105^{*}
 Wrede, W., 283³¹
 Wroth, W., 97¹⁰⁰, 104^{185 186}, 105^{188 189 191}, 191⁶, 192¹¹

Y

- year: Athenian, 278; beginning of, 29–30, 41, 43, 73, 78; of Dionysos, see *trieteris*; of Sirius, 38, 41, 78, 205; solar, 215–216

Z

- Zagreus, 80–89, 110, 114, 190, 193, 231, 267, 270
 Zancani Montuoro, P., 367²⁰⁶
zein, 33, 34
 Zeus, xxxiii, 35, 38, 50–51, 55, 86, 105, 109, 116, 119, 187, 210, 247, 259, 260, 261; Athena born from his head, 278; birth of, 30–33, 113, 266; Dionysos as son of, 69, 83, 106, 110–114, 246; Dionysos born from his thigh, 75, 273–280, 295, 378, 73^{*}, 74^{*}; emasculates himself, 275–276; as his own son, 114; Idaios, 85, 86; Ikmaios, 39; as infant, 44; Kronos castrated by, 36; light associated with, 32, 75, 78; marriage with Hera, 300; Persephone seduced by, 110–114; Semele and, 106, 194; swaddling clothes of, 30, 44; Titans killed by, 242–245; Typhon's battle with, 46, 47–48; of the underworld, 83
 Ziegler, K., 241¹⁸¹, 243¹⁶⁶

Index

444

- Ziehen, L., 167¹⁰⁸
Zielinski, T., 343²⁰³
Zimmermann, H., 32¹⁸
zodiac, 385–387, 146^{*}
zoë, 7, 52, 64, 80, 132, 190, 204–205, 218,
278, 285, 286, 322, 324, 349, 350, 363,
381; *bios* distinguished from, xxviii,
xxxi–xxxvii; Dionysos and, 119, 120,
124, 179, 200, 202, 238, 288, 289, 294,
295, 321; myth of fermentation and,
38, 41; snake as symbol of, 114–115,
117; soul and, 124; symbols of, 95,
116–117
Zschietzschmann, W., 371^{276 278}

Index by Delight Ansley